

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2023

SHOWCASE



MINNESOTA
ORCHESTRA

PLAYBILL®

MINNESOTA ORCHESTRA

Thomas Søndergård, conductor
Nathan Hughes, oboe

Thursday, September 21, 2023, 11AM
Friday, September 22, 2023, 8PM
Saturday, September 23, 2023, 7PM

Orchestra Hall

Richard Strauss

Don Juan, Opus 20

CA. 18'

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Concerto in C major for Oboe and Orchestra, K. 314/285d

CA. 22'

Allegro aperto
Adagio non troppo
Rondo: Allegretto

Nathan Hughes, oboe

I N T E R M I S S I O N

CA. 20'

Richard Strauss

An Alpine Symphony

CA. 51'

THANK YOU

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Minnesota Orchestra concerts are broadcast live on Friday evenings on stations of [YourClassical Minnesota Public Radio](#), including KSJN 99.5 FM in the Twin Cities.



THOMAS SØNDERGÅRD, CONDUCTOR

With these performances, Thomas Søndergård officially begins his tenure as the Minnesota Orchestra's 11th music director after serving for a season as music director designate. A complete profile appears on page 8.

Søndergård offered the following comments on the selection of two works by Richard Strauss for these historic concerts: "What was really important for me is to get to know this ensemble as good as I can and as quickly as possible. The first thing that came to me was a bit like when you make a successful dinner for the first time: you have to ask yourself what are the ingredients, and in which order you make them. Strauss seems to be a good ingredient simply because *Ein Heldenleben* was how we first met. And *Alpine Symphony* is a journey towards a peak and the blue sky—though there will probably be some storms—but it's a nice little picture of a new beginning."



NATHAN HUGHES, OBOE

Nathan Hughes, now in his second season as principal oboe of the Minnesota Orchestra, is a St. Paul native who previously served as principal oboe of the Metropolitan Opera and the Seattle Symphony. A faculty member at the Juilliard School, he is a dedicated teacher whose students have earned significant positions in major orchestras. He has recorded, toured and made guest appearances as principal oboe with the Chicago Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra and San Francisco Symphony. He has performed with chamber music societies across the country and at major festivals including Aspen, Marlboro, Pacific, Salzburg, Santa Fe and Tanglewood. As a soloist he has received acclaim for performances with the MET Chamber Ensemble at Carnegie Hall, Mainly Mozart Festival Orchestra, Orchestra of St. Luke's, Seattle Symphony, La Jolla SummerFest Chamber Orchestra and Verbier Festival Orchestra. He has presented masterclasses in the U.S., Germany, Korea, Sweden, Poland, Canada and Japan, and regularly works with young musicians at the Marlboro Festival in Vermont and the Verbier Festival in Switzerland. He holds degrees from the Cleveland Institute of Music and the Juilliard School. An interview with Hughes appears on page 14 of this issue. More: minnesotaorchestra.org.

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Strauss: *Don Juan*

This symphonic poem tells of Don Juan's romantic exploits, disillusionment with life and ultimate death in a swordfight; notable are the work's mighty horn calls, sweeping violin writing and gorgeous cantilena for solo oboe.

Mozart: *Oboe Concerto*

Mozart's lone concerto for oboe shows the instrument at its most lyrical, with the soloist playing gracefully above a quietly-murmuring orchestra, then engaging in an energetic Rondo.

Strauss: *An Alpine Symphony*

The Alpine Symphony paints a vivid musical picture of a climb through Strauss' beloved Bavarian Alps, employing dazzling orchestral colors and demanding phenomenal feats of virtuosity from the musicians.



RICHARD STRAUSS

B: June 11, 1864
Munich, Germany

D: September 8, 1949
Garmisch-Partenkirchen,
Germany

Don Juan, Opus 20

PREMIERED: November 11,
1889

The summer of 1888 found the 24-year-old Strauss at something of an impasse. Already he had composed some magnificent songs, and his First Symphony, completed when he was 20, had been premiered in New York City. But as a composer, he was still searching for an authentic voice. His career as a conductor was also stalled. He had succeeded Hans von Bülow as conductor of the superb Meiningen Orchestra just when that orchestra was being downsized, and he ended up as third conductor of the Munich Court Opera.

IMAGINATION CATCHING FIRE

In these years Strauss found himself drawn toward descriptive music, particularly to the conception of the “symphonic poem” as it had been shaped by Franz Liszt. Strauss moved tentatively in the direction of representational music with *Aus Italien*, which was more travelogue than drama, and the symphonic poem *Macbeth*. But his imagination—and his art—caught fire when he took up the Don Juan story. He chose not the legendary figure of Molina, Molière, Gluck and Mozart, but one created by the German poet Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850).

Lenau’s Don Juan is a much grimmer character, a philosopher who seeks the “Ideal Woman” through a string of romantic pursuits, and his fate is to find not the ideal but disillusion, destruction and self-disgust. Finally confronted by Don Pedro, a relative of one of his abandoned romances, this Don Juan recognizes the emptiness of his life, purposely lowers his sword during their duel and takes a fatal thrust through his heart.

While Liszt’s symphonic poems had been loosely inspired by legends, paintings and plays, Strauss aimed for a much more exact musical representation (he once bragged that he could set a glass of beer to music). His *Don Juan* is striking in its instant creation of character, the sheer sweep of its writing and the detail of its incidents.

Strauss worked on the score across the summer of 1888 and took it with him that fall when he became the assistant conductor of the Weimar Opera. The management there insisted that he give the premiere with the local orchestra,

which, however, was modestly talented and required many, many rehearsals. But their work paid off. The premiere on November 11, 1889, was a sensation, Strauss’ name swept across Europe, and *Don Juan* may be said to have launched its young creator’s career. A succession of increasingly detailed and brilliant tone poems followed over the next decade.

THE MUSIC: FIERY AND IMAGINATIVE

Don Juan has one of the most famous beginnings in orchestral music. That volcanic opening rush begins off the beat, and it streaks upward across three octaves in the first moments. This fiery flourish leads immediately to Don Juan’s own music, which seems always to be in frantic motion, surging and striving ever higher. In fact, one of the most impressive things about *Don Juan* is its energy: this music boils over, presses forward, erupts—it seems to be in motion even when it is still.

Quick figures from violins and solo oboe suggest an early flirtation, but soon a lush chord for full orchestra (marked *tranquillo*) introduces the sweeping violin solo that signals the Don’s first real passion. Strauss was particularly adept at writing voluptuous love music, and this interlude goes on for some time before the Don tries to escape. On the surging music from the very beginning he breaks free and sets off on new adventures. His second passion brings another notable love scene, this one built on a gorgeous cantilena for solo oboe, but, his conquest made, the Don rushes off on a mighty horn call.

An animated scene follows, perhaps a depiction of Lenau’s carnival sequence, but suddenly matters plunge into gloomy near-silence. Fragmentary reminiscences of earlier love themes reappear as the Don confronts the meaning of his life, and the music rushes into the final confrontation with Don Pedro. Their sword fight is suitably violent, but its climax breaks off in silence as Don Juan abandons the struggle and lowers his sword. Out of the eerie chord that follows, dissonant trumpets mark the thrust of Don Pedro’s blade through Don Juan’s heart, and descending trills lead to the close on grim pizzicato strokes. Don Juan’s quest, once so full of fire, has ended in complete spiritual darkness.

Instrumentation: 3 flutes (1 doubling piccolo), 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, suspended cymbal, triangle, glockenspiel, harp and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY ERIC BROMBERGER.



WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART

B: January 27, 1756
Salzburg, Austria

D: December 5, 1791
Vienna, Austria

Concerto in C major for Oboe and Orchestra, K. 314/285d

COMPOSED: 1776

Mozart wrote his C-major Oboe Concerto in 1776 for the new oboist in the Salzburg court orchestra, Giuseppe Ferlendis. The 20-year-old composer was then in a transitory period of his career: his fourth year as a Salzburg court musician found him yearning for new employment and opportunities in opera, and he would leave the position the following year.

THE MUSIC: AN UNUSUAL INDICATION

ALLEGRO APERTO; ADAGIO NON TROPPO. Mozart gives the concerto's first movement the unusual marking *Allegro aperto*. *Aperto* means "open" in Italian, and no one is quite sure what the musical indication is; the marking has sometimes been translated "clear and distinct." A grand orchestral introduction, full of strength and a wealth of ideas, leads to the entrance of the soloist, who is given new material of their own. The emphasis in this music is on lyricism, and much of this movement has the soloist playing gracefully above a quietly murmuring orchestra. Lyricism also lies at the center of the second movement, labeled *Adagio non troppo*, in which soloist and orchestra share the melodic line.

ALLEGRETTO. Many listeners will discover that they already know the music of the concluding *Allegretto*, which brings the concerto to a spirited and happy end. Mozart liked this rondo so much that six years later, in 1784, he adapted it as Blonde's aria "Welche Wonne, welche Lust" (What Bliss, What Rapture) in Act II of *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, in which the character looks ahead to her rescue from Selim's harem. Also near the end of this movement, as for the first and second, the soloist is offered a brief cadenza.

THE FLUTE CONNECTION

Mozart gave this oboe concerto a new form in 1777, when during a stay in Mannheim he was commissioned by Ferdinand DeJean, a surgeon with the Dutch East India Company and amateur flutist, to write three flute concertos and three flute quartets. The composer completed just one each of the promised concertos and quartets before he had the idea of arranging the previous year's oboe concerto

and presenting it to DeJean as a flute work. The oboe score was later lost, but references in letters confirmed that it had existed, and scholars believed it to be the origin of the D-major Flute Concerto. The solo oboe parts in C and the orchestral parts were rediscovered in Salzburg in 1920 by Bernhard Paumgartner, who demonstrated conclusively the relationship of the two works.

Instrumentation: solo oboe with orchestra comprising 2 oboes, 2 horns and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY ERIC BROMBERGER.

RICHARD STRAUSS

An Alpine Symphony

PREMIERED: October 28, 1915

Richard Strauss' colossal *Alpine Symphony* is one of the most remarkable Western orchestral works depicting nature in sound—epic in its length, instrumental forces and range of sounds. The dates of composition (1911-15) indicate that it closely followed *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Le Bourgeois gentilhomme*, but one looks in vain for the lightness of touch and chamber music qualities of these works. Reverting to the enormous resources required for compositions like *Symphonia domestica*, *Salome* and *Elektra*, Strauss calls for an orchestra of more than 130 musicians. Every aspect of the ascent and descent of an Alpine peak is portrayed, covering a time span of 24 hours.

This richly descriptive piece of program music, nearly an hour in length, shows Strauss at the peak of his orchestrative powers. There was virtually nothing, either spiritual or physical, that he could not depict in sound. To achieve his goals in the *Alpine Symphony*, instruments are combined in unprecedented variety and pushed to the extremes of their range. Utmost virtuosity and stamina are required from every player. In addition to the vast and varied forces required, Strauss additionally calls for a backstage contingent of six horns, two trumpets and two trombones used only in the *Ascent* episode near the beginning. All in all, not the sort of work that is likely to turn up frequently on concert programs—after the Minnesota Orchestra, then known as the Minneapolis Symphonic Orchestra, first performed it in 1916, its next rendering came in 1980. But its dazzling orchestral colors, phenomenal feats of virtuosity, and the sheer fun all this produces for audiences and musicians alike have ensured the *Alpine Symphony* a secure place in the orchestral repertory.

Though Strauss loved the Bavarian Alps and eventually built a villa in Garmisch-Partenkirchen, he was never much of a mountaineer. Nevertheless, at the age of 14, he once

spent a day with some friends climbing a mountain, and later wrote of it to Ludwig Thuille, a friend who missed the expedition. He used terms that closely parallel the events described in the composition he would write more than 30 years later: departure in the wee hours of the morning, the long climb to the summit, getting lost, a violent thunderstorm that thoroughly drenched everyone, drying off in a farmhouse and, upon returning home, his attempts to give a musical recreation of the trip at the piano, “...full of Wagnerian tone-painting and monstrous nonsense.”

The idea for creating an orchestral rendering of this Alpine experience began to stir in the first years of the new century, but serious work began only in 1911, and the bulk of the writing took place during a 100-day stretch in 1914–15. Strauss completed the score on February 8, 1915, and conducted the premiere himself in Berlin on October 28 of that year. The orchestra was, appropriately enough, the Dresden Court Orchestra (today the Dresden Staatskapelle), which over the previous 14 years had given the premieres of four Strauss operas.

THE MOST SENSATIONAL TONE POEM

Although nominally a symphony, this work is a symphonic poem in all but name. One perceives it not as a series of movements in the standard symphonic format (slow introduction and *allegro* first movement; slow second movement; *scherzo* third movement; finale and coda)—though attempts have been made to force it into this framework—but rather as an extended fantasia built on the Lisztian principle of thematic transformation within the context of a story line or pictorial description.

Actually, the *Alpine Symphony* is something of an anomaly in Strauss’ career. It appeared more than a decade after he had written his previous symphonic poem, *Symphonia domestica*, and when he was securely anchored in a career in the opera house, with six operas to his credit, three of them huge successes (*Salome*, *Elektra* and *Der Rosenkavalier*). In the *Alpine Symphony*, his valedictory effort in the world of symphonic poems, Strauss created his biggest, most extravagant and most sensational tone poem of all.

Much has been made of the frankly, even graphically, descriptive nature of this music, and this is a primary issue for its detractors. But Strauss himself saw things differently: “There is no such thing as abstract music; there is good music and bad music. If it is good, it means something; and then it is program music.”

Listeners are of course free to listen to the *Alpine Symphony* as they choose: as a succession of landscapes and weather conditions in sound, as the composer’s artistic affirmation of nature, as a metaphor of life as a mountain which

humans must climb, or in any other way one might like. Listeners will have little difficulty identifying the various scenes and events as they pass by. Nevertheless, a few remarks may be helpful.

The deep silence of *Night* is heard in thick, dark, B-flat minor chords; at times every note of the scale is being sustained. Against this opaque sound, low brass instruments present the first of many statements of a solemn chordal theme suggesting the massive, imposing mountain in all its stern majesty. *Sunrise* uses as its melodic material a bright, A-major derivation of the descending minor scale from the *Night* section.

When the climbers begin their ascent, another principal theme, strongly rhythmic, is heard at the *Allegro* entrance of lower strings, climbs to successively higher levels, and is worked out in elaborate counterpoint. A hunting party is heard in the distance, represented by an off-stage brass ensemble. (Strauss surely got this idea from similar scenes in Wagner’s *Tannhäuser* and *Tristan and Isolde*.)

As the climbers continue their journey, orchestral colors, textures and melodies depict thickening foliage, bird calls, yodels, waterfalls, the apparition of a water sprite, expansive flowery meadows, herds of cattle (the idea to use cowbells here is possibly derived from Mahler’s Sixth Symphony), idyllic calm and beauty of the slopes, the slippery surface of a glacier, the climbers transfixed by the awesome view from the summit, haze obscuring the sun, ominous stillness and calm before the storm, distant flashes of lightning, isolated raindrops, thunder, the fury of a blinding storm enhanced by a terrific explosion from the thunder sheet at the climax, the nostalgic glow of sunset, spiritual tranquility at the end of a fulfilling day, and finally, the gloom of night once more as the noble mass of the mountain recedes into darkness and memory, 24 hours after we first encountered it.

Instrumentation: 4 flutes (2 doubling piccolo), 3 oboes (1 doubling English horn), heckelphone, 3 clarinets (1 doubling bass clarinet), E-flat clarinet, 4 bassoons (1 doubling contrabassoon), 8 horns (4 doubling Wagner tuba), 4 trumpets, 4 trombones, 2 tubas, timpani, snare drum, bass drum, cymbals, cowbell, tamtam, triangle, thunder sheet, wind machine, glockenspiel, celesta, 2 harps, organ, offstage brass ensemble (6 horns, 2 trumpets and 2 trombones) and strings

PROGRAM NOTE BY ROBERT MARKOW.