

**Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes**  
**March 14-15-16, 2025**  
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**J. Michael Allsen**

This program explores the legacies of two composers, Richard Strauss, and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, through their final works. After opening with one of Strauss's great youthful tone poems, *Don Juan*, soprano Amanda Majeski joins the orchestra for what Strauss himself called his *Four Last Songs*. When he finally addresses the topic of death in the final song, the mood is not of resignation or fear, but of calm acceptance and satisfaction. Then mezzo-soprano Kirsten Lippart, tenor Joshua Sanders, bass Matt Boehler and the Madison Symphony Chorus join with Majewski for Mozart's great *Requiem*. This was literally the work Mozart was writing while he was on his deathbed, and it was left unfinished when he died in December 1791. It was completed after his death by his associate Franz Xaver Süssmayr. It appears that at least some of the familiar version of the *Requiem* that will be heard at these programs may indeed not be Mozart's, but its music no less profound or impressive.

This work, one of Strauss's early symphonic poems, takes its story from a 19th-century version of the Don Juan legend.

**Richard Strauss**

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

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

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

- **Composed:** 1887-88.
- **Premiere:** November 11, 1889 at the Weimar Opera House.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1947, 1974, 1980, 1992, 2007, and 2016.
- **Duration:** 18:00.

**Background**

The direct inspiration for *Don Juan* was Strauss's love for Pauline de Anha, a young soprano, whom he would eventually marry.

Strauss composed in virtually every musical genre, producing a huge collection of operas, symphonic works, ballets, songs, and chamber music during a musical career spanning more than seventy years. But his most frequently-performed

orchestral works—and the works that first gained him international fame—are a series of symphonic poems he composed as a relatively young man. The symphonic poem, the most thoroughly romantic of symphonic forms, developed in the nineteenth century as an expression of poetic or philosophical ideas in music, or frequently, as pure program music that tells a story. The musical forms of these works transcend the old symphonic molds, as a 24-year-old Strauss wrote in 1888:

“If you want to create a work of art that is unified in its mood and consistent in its structure, and if that work is to give the listener a clear and definite impression, then what the composer wants to say must be just as clear in his own mind. This is only possible through inspiration by a poetic idea, whether or not it is introduced as a ‘program.’ I consider it a legitimate artistic method to create a new form for each new subject; a task that is very difficult, but all the more attractive for its very difficulty...”

In 1887, Strauss became infatuated with Pauline de Ahna, a young soprano, and he was inspired to write a work based upon his new-found love. The poetic idea behind this work came from the most erotic of stories, the 17th-century story of Spanish seducer Don Juan—the same story that inspired Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. Strauss took his direct inspiration from a 19th-century retelling of the Don Juan legend by the poet Nikolaus Lenau. Lenau's portrayal of Don Juan is not particularly sympathetic, but he does portray the Don as a figure who is hopelessly driven by his own desire for sexual fulfillment, and who is increasingly disappointed and bored after each conquest. In the end, Lenau's Don Juan accepts death at the hands of a girl's vengeful father, as the only escape from a meaningless life. This was pretty strong stuff for a young late-19th-century gentleman to write with a respectable young lady in mind! But it was well in keeping with romantic ideals of the artistic temperament. (And Pauline did, after all, marry Strauss a few years later.) The new work, *Don Juan*, was first performed in Weimar in 1889, and published a year later: the first of Strauss's musical works to appear in print.

### **What You'll Hear**

Though Strauss does not include an explicit program, it is easy to follow the Don Juan story in the music: through music representing his passionate character, through a couple of love affairs, to the climactic sword fight and death of the Don.

Strauss included three extended quotations from Lenau's poem at the beginning of the score, but did not provide a specific program for the music. Even so, it is irresistible to conjure up the outlines of the story from Strauss's music. The

opening music, fiery and passionate, can only represent Don Juan himself (and perhaps Strauss's own vision of himself as a twentysomething lover). The central section of the work is dominated by two amorous interludes. The first and shorter interlude is light and flirtatious in character, but tossed aside in fairly short order when the Don spots another woman. The second interlude is more serious—as if the woman in Don Juan's eye means something more than just another prize. The expansive main theme of this section is introduced by the solo oboe and developed extensively throughout the orchestra. After this theme is thoroughly elaborated, the music becomes disconsolate. The exuberant opening music returns as Don Juan apparently shakes off his depression, and goes in search of further conquests. The coda comes with a brilliant musical scene that recalls the climactic swordfight between Don Juan and Don Pedro. In Lenau's poem, Don Juan has victory in his grasp, but suddenly allows his enemy to run him through. Strauss's music comes to a tremendous orchestral crescendo, a grand pause, and a hushed postlude that recalls the Don's dying words:

“It was a beautiful storm that drove me on; it has subsided, and left behind a calm. All of my hopes and desires are seemingly dead. Perhaps a bolt of lightning from the Heaven that I despised has struck down my powers of love, and suddenly my world becomes deserted and dark. And yet, perhaps not — the fuel is all burnt and the hearth is cold ”

If *Don Juan* represented Strauss as a vigorous young man, his *Four Last Songs*, written some 60 years later, reflect a sad and contemplative composer at the end of a long career.

### ***Four Last Songs***

- **Composed:** 1948.
- **Premiere:** The songs were published after his death and were first performed by soprano Kirsten Flagstad and the Philharmonia Orchestra, under the direction of Wilhelm Furtwängler, on May 22, 1950 in London
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1962 (with soprano Ilona Kombink) and 1986 (Lorna Haywood).
- **Duration:** 21:00.

### **Background**

These orchestral songs were written at the end of Strauss's life, and he seems to have intended them as a final statement. The final song is to a text by Joseph von Eichendorff, while the first three are by Hermann Hesse.

The last years of Strauss's life were marked by sadness and setbacks. The most prominent figure in German music of the 1930s and the War years, Strauss stayed in Germany when so many others fled. He cooperated with the Nazis' cultural program, though the extent of his true collaboration remains the subject of debate. In 1933, he was appointed president of the Nazi Reichsmusikkammer, though he was forced to resign two years later, largely because of his connections with the Jewish writer and librettist Stefan Zweig and because his daughter-in-law was also of Jewish ancestry. Though he produced a few occasional pieces for the Nazi regime, through much of the war, he and his family were harassed, and even at times held prisoner by the Gestapo. At the war's end, he underwent a humiliating "de-Nazification" trial, though he was cleared of all charges. The aged Strauss was cut off from most sources of income, and spent much of his last few years—years of declining health for both Strauss and his wife—in voluntary exile in Switzerland. On a trip to England in October 1947, a reporter asked the 83-year-old composer what his future plans were. Strauss's answer was brief, and must have caused an uncomfortable silence: "To die."

Despite all of this, Strauss produced a series of astonishing works in his last few years: his final opera *Capriccio* (1941—the production of yet another opera, *Danae*, was halted by Nazi authorities in 1944), the dark *Metamorphosen* (1945), his brilliant *Oboe Concerto* (1945), and most profound of all, the *Four Last Songs*. In 1948, Strauss came upon *Im Abendrot* (In Twilight) by the German romantic poet Eichendorff. This poem, a picture of an aging couple who look forward to death with calm and dignity must have resonated strongly with Strauss, and he completed a superb setting for soprano and orchestra in May 1948. This was to have been part of a larger song-cycle of five songs, the remainder being settings of poems by the German poet and novelist Hermann Hesse. Hesse, who won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1946, was also in a kind of self-imposed exile in Switzerland, though in his case he had left Germany at the close of the first world war. The Hesse poems selected by Strauss also accord with the ideas of rest and a life that is ending. In *Frühling*, (Spring) there are hints of resurrection and rebirth. In *September*, the withering of a garden and the falling of leaves becomes a metaphor for death itself. *Beim Schlafengehen* (While going to sleep) speaks of a longed-for rest and the freeing of one's soul to a richer life. Settings of the three Hesse poems were finished in September 1948. A fourth Hesse setting, intended as part of the same set, was left incomplete when Strauss died a year later. Strauss did not leave any instructions regarding the order of the songs, and they have become best known in the order in which they appeared in the posthumous published score.

## What You'll Hear

The songs have a clear dramatic arc: from the happy optimism of *Frühling*, through the more wistful *September* and dark *Beim Schlafengehen*, to the calm consummation of *Im Abendrot*.

*Frühling* sets the text above a turbulent orchestral background at the beginning. The song comes to a turning-point on the soprano's exuberant line on the word "Vogelsang" ("bird-song"), and continues in a joyous mood until the end. In *September*, the musical setting retains the garden's former lushness under the soprano's unhurried presentation of the poem. At the end there is lovely horn solo and string passage that serves as a kind of epilogue. The third song, *Beim Schlafengehen*, is also the darkest, with intense contrapuntal lines supporting the soprano. Strauss inserts a luminous violin solo as a bridge between the second and third stanzas, and rounds off the song with a quiet coda. In the last and longest song, *Im Abendrot*—which inspired Strauss to undertake this project—he places the soprano above a rich, dense, romantic texture. When she finally sings of death itself, the mood is not of resignation or fear, but of calm acceptance and satisfaction. In the closing bars, Strauss includes a quiet allusion to his own 1889 tone poem *Death and Transfiguration*.

Mozart's final work, left unfinished at the time of his death, was a magnificent setting of the Latin *Requiem*, or Mass for the Dead.

## Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

**Born:** January 27, 1756, Salzburg, Austria.

**Died:** December 5, 1791, Vienna, Austria.

### *Requiem*, K. 626

- **Composed:** Mozart's *Requiem* was composed in the summer and late fall of 1791. The work was unfinished at Mozart's death, but was completed by his associate Franz Xaver Sussmayr in 1792 or 1793.
- **Premiere:** The first performance probably occurred in Vienna shortly after it was completed.
- **Previous MSO Performances:** 1963, 1982, 2004, and 2014.
- **Duration:** 47:00.

## Background

As his final, unfinished work, Mozart's *Requiem* is surrounded by mystique—perhaps most familiarly through the climactic scene of the movie *Amadeus*. The real story is perhaps just as dramatic...though not nearly so sinister.

The Latin text of the *Requiem*, or Mass for the Dead, has provided composers with inspiration for over 500 years. In the Catholic liturgy prior to the Vatican II reforms, the Latin *Requiem* was sung at burial services and on All Soul's Day (November 2), in remembrance of the faithful dead. At the heart of the *Requiem* is the lengthy sequence *Dies irae*. This text dwells on the terror and destruction of the Day of Judgement foretold in the Book of Revelation, and the petitioner's prayers for safety from the Lord's wrath. The offertory *Domine Jesu Christe* offers prayers for the dead, and recalls the promise of redemption. The Mass closes with the gentle imagery of the *Lux aeterna*, a further prayer for intercession, celebrating the merciful Lord. Mozart's setting of the *Requiem* is one of the most powerful settings of these emotive texts.

No work of Mozart's is surrounded by more historical mystique than his *Requiem*. His Mass for the Dead was his last work, and was left uncompleted at the time of his own death on December 5, 1791. The most popular legend about the *Requiem* concerns a mysterious and sinister "messenger in gray" who commissioned the *Requiem* and who may have had a hand in Mozart's death. With all due respect to F. Murray Abrams and Tom Hulse, the real story is no less interesting, although somewhat less than sinister. In the spring or summer of 1791, a Viennese nobleman, Count Franz Walsegg von Stuppach, sent his steward to Mozart with an anonymous commission for a setting of the *Requiem* Mass. Walsegg's wife had died earlier that year, and he envisioned the *Requiem* as a monument to her. Mozart set the rather exorbitant price of 60 ducats for the composition, and to his surprise, the anonymous commissioner immediately sent 30 ducats, with a promise to pay the balance upon completion. Walsegg, an amateur composer, would occasionally commission works from Vienna's professional composers and then pass them off as his own—this may have been his intent with the *Requiem*. Mozart completed some of the sketches for the *Requiem* immediately, although work on was interrupted by operatic projects: completion of *Die Zauberflöte* and *La Clemenza di Tito*, and a trip to Prague in August for a production of his opera *Don Giovanni*. He returned to the *Requiem* in October, and began to work diligently. Mozart's health and financial situation were deteriorating by this time, but there is no reason to credit the notion that he was consumed with thoughts of death in the last months of his life. However, when he realized that the end might well be near – a few days prior to his death – he did indeed work feverishly on the *Requiem*,

even enlisting the help of friends (though, alas, not Salieri...) as copyists. By the time he died, Mozart had completed the orchestration of the first two movements and a partial score for the music up to the *Lacrymosa*. He had apparently sketched out most of the remainder.

Mozart's wife Constanze, who badly needed the money from the anonymous commission, asked Mozart's friend and student Joseph Eybler to complete the *Requiem*. Eybler did some work with Mozart's sketches, but soon found that it was taking more time than he could afford. The task then fell to another associate of Mozart's, Franz Xaver Süssmayr, who produced a complete version of the *Requiem* by 1793. (Among Constanze's reasons for selecting Süssmayer—an otherwise undistinguished composer—may have been that his handwriting closely resembled Mozart's, and she needed to pass this off as entirely her late husband's work!) A few years later, Süssmayr wrote a letter indicating that the *Sanctus*, *Benedictus*, and *Agnus Dei* were entirely his own creations, setting off a storm of debate that continues in our own time. It appears that at least some of the familiar version of the *Requiem* that will be heard this at these programs may indeed be Süssmayr's, but its authorship makes the music no less profound or impressive.

### **What You'll Hear**

Although some parts of the *Requiem* follow well-established Austrian tradition in setting the text, Mozart's *Requiem* is remarkable for its sensitivity in expressing the meaning and emotional content of the text in his music.

The *Introitus* begins with a dark woodwind passage that closes with three abrupt trombone chords to usher in the chorus. As always, Mozart's setting is driven by the meaning of the text. Just one detailed example—just the first three lines—should suffice: after the dour and strict counterpoint of *Requiem aeternam*, and the impassioned homophony of *et lux perpetua*, the orchestra enters with a major-key transformation of the opening orchestral passage and the mezzo enters with *Te decet hymnus*. Mozart's form reflects the meaning of the text perfectly: from the stark imagery of the grave, to the metaphor of light, to a more personal appeal. The *Kyrie* is an intense choral fugue that climaxes in a dramatic pause and a stark unison in the chorus.

The long, dramatically complex *Sequentia* is divided into several sections. The *Dies irae* is set in an angry choral passage punctuated by military trumpet calls. The bass's *Tuba mirum* is announced by a trombone solo and decorated by a lovely obbligato. Each of the soloists enters in turn in the next section, culminating with an emotional *Quid sum miser tunc dicturus?* from the quartet. The choral *Rex*

*tremendae* begins stridently, but closes with a fervent prayer. The soloists carry the next passage, which contains the most personal lines of supplication in the *Requiem*. Both anger and pleading return in the choral *Confutatis*, culminating in a prayer for mercy sung above mysterious trombone chords. *Lacrymosa* closes the *Sequentia* in a mood of profound sadness. (Mozart had originally intended to close the movement with an *Amen* fugue, but this exists only in sketches.)

The *Offertorium* begins with a pale echo of the anger of the *Dies irae*, but here it is more restless in character. This is answered by the sublime prayer of the *Hostias*, and a return of the hopeful reminder *quam olim Abrahae*. While Süßmayr claimed to have written much of the music from *Sanctus* onwards, most writers seem to agree that he worked from themes and ideas sketched out by Mozart before he died. (Indeed a lot of this music simply seems *too good* to have been composed exclusively by Süßmayr, whose surviving church music is pedestrian at best!) *Sanctus* begins with a simple choral statement of the threefold *Sanctus* and closes with a brief *Hosanna* fugue. *Benedictus* is an operatic ensemble for the soloists that closes with a reprise of the *Hosanna* fugue. *Agnus Dei* is a rather simple choral setting that ends with a clear preparation for the last movement. Probably following Mozart's original intent, the closing *Communio* begins with a reminiscence of the *Requiem*'s opening music. The closing, *cum sanctis tuis*, is a reworking of the *Kyrie* fugue, which brings the *Requiem* to a magnificent conclusion.