

Don Quijote op. 35 by Richard Strauss: history of a reception

by Germán Marcano

“The performance of Strauss Tone Poem on Friday afternoon and last night by the Chicago Orchestra must have aroused a good deal of discussion among musicians. It is easy enough to decry certain tendencies as being outside the sphere of real music; but when one is confronted with a work which appeals so directly to the imagination as “Don Quijote” that it would be foolish to deny its artistic merits, what is to become of theory?, The “Don Quijote is certainly a work of art, but to what department of art does it belong, if not music? ...But such tone-poem as ...the Don Quijote of Richard Strauss would be condemned ...because (it) undoubtedly contain passages which are distinctively ugly, regarded as music, but have their value as imitations.”

Chicago Tribune, January 8. 1899

“It is difficult to grant the composer’s postulates, and much readjustment of ideas will be needed before “Don Quijote”, with all its beauties, can be listened as anything other than a tour de force. Nor will the question fall to present itself as to how far the composer means to be taken seriously in it; how far he is bent on carrying out the mystification suggested in his pedantic title with its conventional Italian description: how far he means to push the “Fantastical” of which he gives warning in it.”

The New York Times, February 19.1904

Inspired by the famous Spanish novel from 1605 by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra (1547-1616), the Symphonic poem *Don Quijote* Op. 35 is the sixth of the series of ten programmatic masterpieces written by Richard Strauss (1864-1949) between 1886 and 1915. Composed in 1897 and first performed in 1898, *Don Quijote* stands as his finest example of musical painting, and, as the conductor Norman Del Mar puts it, “...a firm

landmark in the Post-Romantic School of orchestral music"¹. However, this work has not found its way into the concert hall as easily as other Symphonic poems by the same composer. While compositions like *Don Juan*, *Also Sprach Zarathustra* and *Ein Heldenleben* have always enjoyed popularity among listeners and musicians, *Don Quijote* has for some reason invited criticism since the time of its composition. Many of the reasons for this unjustifiable attitude can be associated with the impracticality of performance, general repudiation to certain effects and, on the whole, a lack of knowledge of what the work is really about.

There is nothing new about setting the adventures of the ingenuous knight to music. Composers like Telemann, Purcell, Rubinstein and Massenet had written suites and operas on the subject. These earlier attempts, however, did not influence Strauss approach in depicting the adventures of the famous knight and his squire (he hardly knew any of them), since he devised a method of musical representation using thematic transformation. The work is presented in three sections: an introduction that depicts the gradual deterioration of Don Quijote's mental health, a group of ten variations corresponding to ten episodes in the novel, and the Epilog which describes Don Quijote's return to sanity and eventual death.

The name *Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character*, as the author titled it, is somehow misleading since it associates this composition with classical variation technique and not with thematic transformation. Even today performances of *Don Quijote*

¹ Norman del Mar: *Richard Strauss: A critical commentary on his life and works*. Cornell University Press. 1986.

raise questions among listeners, who come out of the concerts having enjoyed the Epilog, but wonder what the rest of the piece is about. The general reaction at the time of its first performance² was similar:

“...The work...aroused the greatest interest in all musicians, without always gaining their sympathy at the same time”

Musikalishes Wochenblatt (issue no.12, 1898)

In March 18, ten days after its premiere, Strauss conducted the work in Frankfurt with similar results:

“...R. Strauss new symphonic poem Don Quijote aroused the most interest in Frankfurt...and was warmly applauded, even though there was some dissent”

Musikalishes Wochenblatt (issue no.13, 1898)

If the daring design of the work provoke reactions against it, the various effects that Strauss used to depict some of the adventures of the hero have been controversial from its composition to the present day. One of the most talked about episodes of the work is Variation II, which describes onomatopoeically the bleating of the sheep which Don Quijote attacked, taking them for the mighty army of Alifanfaron and Pentapolin, King of the Garamantas (measure 234-40). In these measures the work, basically tonally-orientated, takes a turn into a completely atonal and almost aleatoric style which, if best to describe the events of the story, could not be accepted by the 1898 audiences, who aroused noisy protests. The review of the first American performance³ in 1899 referred quite rudely about this particular passage:

“...if the truth must be told one is inclined to be a little sorry

² Strauss was in Spain at the time of the first performance (March 8, 1898). This was conducted by Franz Wullner, with Friederick Grutzmacher as the cello soloist.

³ The first American performance took place on January 6th, 1899 in Chicago, with Chicago Symphony under Theodore Thomas, less than a year after the German premiere.

that Richard Strauss did not omit those grossly realistic touches in "Don Quijote" which must certainly mar the work for a great many listeners. ...why not bring a real sheep into the orchestra and train them to bleat at a given signal.

Chicago Tribune, January 8th, 1899

When the work was performed in Paris in 1900 conducted by Strauss, his friend Romain Rolland recalled that the French also reacted strongly against this episode:

"...Indignation from one section of the public. The good old French public...does not tolerate a joke, thinks it is being laughed at, the people are disrespectful to it. The baaing of the sheep infuriates it."

Diary, 11 March 1900⁴

For many years this passage has been the center of discussion among critics and historians, whose arguments fail to understand the programmatic nature of the work and ignore other wonderful depictions in it, like Quijote's gradual mental disintegration and his sublime submission to death. It is, however, interesting that whereas Debussy's *L'après midi d'un faune* (1897) is considered the pioneer composition of the music of the 20th century, the bleating of the sheep from Strauss *Don Quijote*, more advanced than anything composed at the time, is hardly mentioned in historical treatises.

More than conductors and audiences, it has been the solo cellists who have contributed mainly to the establishment of Strauss's *Don Quijote* as one of the major orchestral scores of the 19th century. The role of Don Quijote, assigned by Strauss to a solo cello, has been performed by all the major cello soloists of the 20th century, some of them identified so much with the knight as to be nicknamed after him⁵. This has changed the

⁴ Richard Strauss and Romaine Rolland Correspondance. University of California Press. LA 1968

⁵ The German cellist Hugo Becker (1863-1941) and the French Paul Tortelier (1914-19) were at some time in their career identified as "Don Quijote".

original conception of the work, which has been transformed from a Symphonic poem into a Cello Concerto.

By looking at the score one can presume that Strauss intended the solo part for the leader of the orchestral cello section, with careful indications given to the inside player. Modern performances of the work, however, tend to adopt the usual concerto sitting, where the soloist sits in front of the orchestra, omitting the numerous and complex “tutti” sections. Although this seating provides a visually attractive solo element to the work, the original intention is again misinterpreted. The seating gets in the way of the elaborate scoring for groups of cellos, and especially of the partnership of the cello and the viola solo, instrument that takes the role of Sancho Panza⁶. In spite of this, the work has already acquired this tradition of performance in concerto setting, and was even adopted by the composer himself in later years.

This conception of the work as a cello concerto creates the impracticality of having to find a soloist to perform the role of Don Quijote, a well known player that makes up for the little popularity of the piece. In view of the problem, most orchestras prefer to program more popular concertos, so the double function of good soloist-popular composition could be filled.

Apart from the impracticality mentioned, Strauss’s Don Quijote calls for some unusual features in its orchestration: a tenor tuba, two additional horns and, for the first time in

⁶ This role is not only taken by the viola solo, but in some episodes is also adopted by the tenor tuba, and the bass clarinet.

Western Orchestral music, a Wind Machine. This apparatus is introduced in Variation VII (measures 515-25) added to rapid chromatic scales in the winds, to illustrate the flying ride of Don Quijote and Sancho Panza⁷. Although the use of this device has a specific programmatic function in the work (he also used it in the *Sinfonia Alpina*, 1915), this pioneering thought had some repercussions in the work of later composers like Ravel (*Daphnis et Chloe*, 1912), Schoenberg (*Jacobleister*, 1922), Milhaud and Vaughan Williams.

This colorful and exuberant orchestration of *Don Quijote* was perhaps the aspect that attracted the most the attention of the older generation of composers in the late 19th century. His skills as a brilliant orchestrator were recognized by celebrated composers and critics from the times of *Don Juan* (1888), even though many of them did not sympathize with his musical ideas:

*“Color is everything, musical thoughts nothing”
“...a brilliant virtuoso of the orchestra, lacking only
musical ideas”*⁸

Edward Hanslick 1892⁹

Strauss’s daring orchestration in *Don Quijote* was, however, highly criticized by some of his elder contemporaries:

*“I saw the score of Don Quijote. What a shameless
this Richard Strauss is!”*

Rimski Korsakov¹⁰

⁷ The low D in basses and Timpani describe that, in reality, they have never left the ground. (Chapter XLI)

⁸ This statement was made after hearing *Todd und Verklarung* in 1893.

⁹ Eduard Hanslick: Vienna Golden years of Music 1850-1900. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1950

¹⁰ Letter from Rimski to Taneyev. From Notes on recording Classics AB-67023, ABC Records, By Donald Johns.

Others, on the contrary, applauded his inventiveness and called it “*Orchestral thinking*”¹¹:

“A wind Machine?, Why not? The only thing that matters is whether the composer...achieves the desired result” Antonin Dvorak¹²

By 1904 *Don Quijote* had been performed in most of the important musical capitals of Europe and the USA. During this highly revolutionary time in the history of music the work attracted the attention of contemporary composers with fresher ideas who could tolerate and understand the daring thoughts of this controversial composer. The German composer Max Reger (1873-1916) was fascinated with its inventiveness when he studied the score in 1902:

“I recently very eagerly studied Richard Strauss Don Quijote; it is fabulous what the man writes. I am just so happy and excited that we have him”
Letter to Arthur Seidl, Dec 29th, 1902¹³

Another composer highly impressed with Strauss’s *Don Quijote* was Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924), who heard the work on two occasions, its second New York performance in 1904 (under Strauss), and a later Boston performance in 1911. According to Busoni the New York performance of the work, with Casals on the cello, was not very successful: badly attended and poorly performed, having to start it twice. After the Boston performance, however, his admiration for the master was expressed in a letter to his wife:

¹¹ After hearing *Don Quijote*, Dvorak described with this term the requirements of any orchestral composition. Ernst Krause: *Richard Strauss. The man and his Works*. Collet’s LTD. London. 1964. Pag.170.

¹² Ernst Krause: *Richard Strauss. The man and his Works*. Collet’s LTD. London. 1964. Pag.223.

“It is a work of great quality, ordinarily in the lyrical spots, extraordinarily exciting in the grotesque parts, ...one of the most interesting and creative things of our time and may be the best from this composer”¹⁴

In spite of the great impressions that Strauss *Don Quijote* left in these younger contemporaries and other important figures, this work can not really be considered an influential force in the music to come. Strauss was the last 19th century Romantic composer, living in a time when the elements and aesthetics of music composition were changing radically. As the breakdown of tonality was already imminent, Strauss music experimented further in tonality without abandoning the melodious style of his Romantic German predecessors. The Symphonic poem, which was at its highest point at the time of *Don Juan*, lost the battle with the “Absolute Music” critics, practically disappearing after 1915, leaving Strauss as the last Master of the genre. The ten Tone Poems of Richard Strauss represent an artistic culmination of a genre that was only to have a relatively small influence in the music of the 20th century.

Although today audiences (and even musicians) still react to *Don Quijote* in the same way as the public of 1898, the work has a definite place in the repertoire of every major orchestra, conductor and cellist. It is indisputably the composer’s finest example of musical painting, his most daring in design and most controversial in effects. It is in fact because of this daringness and controversy that the character of Cervantes’s *Don Quijote* comes to life, a man who in the realms of reality searches for love and justice. This

¹³ Mueller von Asow: Richard Strauss. Thematisches Verzeichnis. Verlag L. Doblinger. Wien-Wisbaden. 1955. Originally in German. Pag 220.

¹⁴ Idem. Pag 221

character reflects in a way Strauss own life as a composer, immersed in his own musical world searching for the highest artistic goals.

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