

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA  
PAYARE AND WEILERSTEIN  
A Jacobs Masterworks Concert  
Rafael Payare, conductor**

January 11, 12 and 13, 2019

**RICHARD STRAUSS**

*Don Juan, Op. 20*

**BENJAMIN BRITTEN**

**Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 68**

Allegro maestoso

Presto inquieto

Adagio

Passacaglia: Andante allegro

**Alisa Weilerstein, cello**

INTERMISSION

**DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH**

**Symphony No. 10 in E minor, Op. 93**

Moderato

Allegro

Allegretto

Andante – Allegro

## **SYMPHONIES BY FRIENDS**

Composers can sometimes be prickly loners, but history does record some close friendships between composers. Haydn and Mozart. Mendelssohn and Schumann. Bartók and Kodály. Holst and Vaughan Williams. One of the most unlikely friendships was between the composers of the two symphonies on this program. Benjamin Britten was a somewhat reserved Englishman. Dmitri Shostakovich was an intensely nervous, chain-smoking Russian. Yet they knew and admired each other's music long before they met in 1960, and they became close friends. Britten visited Shostakovich several times in Russia, Shostakovich dedicated his Fourteenth Symphony to Britten, and Britten dedicated his parable *The Prodigal Son* to the Russian. Shostakovich was one of the greatest symphonists of the twentieth century, but Britten was not drawn to write symphonies. This program, though, offers what are (arguably) the two men's greatest symphonies: Shostakovich's dark Tenth and the "Cello Symphony" that Britten composed for Mstislav Rostropovich, who had been introduced to Britten by...Dmitri Shostakovich.

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

RICHARD STRAUSS

Born June 11, 1864, Munich

Died September 8, 1949, Garmisch-Partenkirchen

The summer of 1888 found the 24-year-old Strauss found himself drawn toward descriptive music, particularly to the conception of the "symphonic poem" as that had been shaped by Franz Liszt. Strauss' own imagination caught fire when he took up the Don Juan story. Strauss, however, chose not the legendary figure of Molina, Moliere, Gluck and Mozart, but instead a different Don Juan, one created by the German poet Nikolaus Lenau (1802-1850). Lenau's Don is a much darker figure, a philosopher who seeks the Ideal Woman through his conquest of individual women, and his fate is to find not the ideal but only disillusion, destruction and self-disgust. Finally confronted by Don Pedro, a relative of one of his conquests, Lenau's Don Juan recognizes the emptiness of his life, purposely lowers his sword during their duel and takes a fatal thrust through his heart.

Strauss worked on the score to *Don Juan* across the summer of 1888 and took it with him that fall when he became the assistant conductor of the Weimar Opera. When the management of the opera learned of this music, they insisted that he give the premiere with the local orchestra.

That opera orchestra was modestly-talented, and it took many, many rehearsals to get it ready. In a letter to his parents Strauss caught the spirit of those sessions, telling of a sweaty horn-player who confronted the composer and demanded: “Good God, in what way have we sinned that you have sent us this scourge!” Strauss went on: “We laughed till we cried! Certainly the horns blew without fear of death ... I was really sorry for the wretched horns and trumpets. They were quite blue in the face, the whole affair was so strenuous.” 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.

*Don Juan* has one of the most famous beginnings in music. That volcanic opening rush (Strauss stresses that it must be *Allegro molto con brio*) begins off-the-beat, and from out of that empty beat it streaks upward across three octaves in the first instants. This fiery flourish leads immediately to Don Juan’s own music, which seems always to be in frantic motion, surging and striving ever higher. Quick figures from violins and solo oboe suggest an early flirtation, but soon a lush chord for full orchestra 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, but suddenly matters plunge into gloomy near-silence. 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.

### **Symphony for Cello and Orchestra, Op. 68**

BENJAMIN BRITTEN

Born November 22, 1913, Lowestoft

Died December 4, 1976, Aldeburgh

In September 1960, Shostakovich introduced two of his close friends: Russian cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, then 33, and English composer Benjamin Britten, then 47. Those two in turn became close friends, and Britten resolved to write something that he and Rostropovich

could perform together. This was the *Cello Sonata*, completed in January 1961. The premiere was scheduled for the following summer in Aldeburgh, and Britten and Rostropovich got together to rehearse it for the first time. Some measure of their cordiality can be sensed from the cellist's account of that rehearsal: "Ben said, 'Well, Slava, do you think we have time for a drink first?' I said, 'Yes, yes,' so we both drank a large whisky. Then Ben said: 'Maybe we have time for another one?' 'Yes, yes,' I said. Another large whisky. After four or five very large whiskies we finally sat down and played through the sonata. We played like pigs, but we were so happy." The premiere went quite well, and Britten resolved to compose a piece for cello and orchestra for Rostropovich.

But Britten first had to compose his monumental *War Requiem*, and then he suffered a bout of disabling shoulder pain. Not until the summer of 1962 could he return to the big piece for Rostropovich, but as work progressed, Britten recognized that what he was composing would not be a cello concerto. In November 1962 he sent the cellist the first movement, along with a note that suggests Britten himself was having trouble understanding exactly the form the new work would take:

As you see, it is going to be rather a big piece; this is only the first of four big movements – very much shaped like a symphony in fact, I wonder whether it would not be better to call it Sinfonia Concertante... I hope you will like it so far, dear Slava; I must confess I can hear you in every note and every bar, although I fear it may not be worthy of your great art.

Rostropovich wrote back, reassuring him that the first movement was at "the very top of everything ever written for cello."

Britten led the premiere in Moscow on March 12, 1964, with Rostropovich and the Moscow Philharmonic. That premiere was cheered wildly, but the piece's form remained hard to define. It was not a concerto in the traditional sense, nor was it really a sinfonia concertante. The composer had finally decided to call it "Symphony for Cello and Orchestra," which was an unusual choice because Britten was not by nature a symphonist. But now, writing for a heroic cellist and a large orchestra, Britten composed the biggest symphonic work of his career. He described the Symphony for Cello and Orchestra as "an argument on equal terms, rather than just a pure background for the orchestra."

The "Cello Symphony" is a large-scale work, clearly symphonic in form and gesture. It is also supremely difficult for the cellist – Britten was writing for the best cellist on the planet, and he knew it. The opening *Allegro maestoso* is in sonata form, contrasting its dramatic, striving

opening statement with more subdued secondary material. In sharp contrast, the second movement is the briefest of scherzos. Britten gives it the apt marking *Presto inquieto* – this is unsettling music, like some whiff of a passing nightmare, whirling and skittering along its way before it suddenly vanishes in front of us.

The *Adagio* is the emotional center of the symphony. Over pounding timpani, the cello sings the long lament that will be the central theme, which rises to grand climax on a series of brass chords over timpani interjections. This movement proceeds without pause into a long cadenza for the soloist – Britten may call this a symphony, but he preserves the cadenza of the traditional concerto. This cadenza is extremely difficult for the cellist, who must master such challenges as simultaneous bowed and pizzicato passages. The shining peal of a bright solo trumpet introduces the final movement, a passacaglia. The cello lays out the movement's fundamental ground bass, and there follow six sharply-contrasted variations. The movement rises to a grand and heartfelt peroration, and the conclusion is surprising in its suddenness.

### **Symphony No. 10 in E minor, Op. 93**

DMITRI SHOSTAKOVICH

Born September 25, 1906, St. Petersburg

Died August 9, 1975, Moscow

Shostakovich and other leading Russian composers were pilloried at the infamous 1948 Congress of the Union of Soviet Composers, a showcase inquisition put on by a government intent on keeping its artists on a short leash. Charged with writing music that “dwells too much on the dark and fearful aspects of reality,” Shostakovich was dismissed from his teaching positions and forced to read a humiliating confession. His apology makes painful reading: “I have always listened to criticism addressed to me and have tried my best to work harder and better. I am listening now too, and will listen in the future. I will accept critical instruction.”

And then, mentally, he went underground. The public Shostakovich supported his family by writing film scores and patriotic music, but the private composer wrote the music *he* wanted to and kept it back, waiting for a more liberal atmosphere. Such a day seemed to come with the death of Stalin on March 5, 1953, and that summer Shostakovich set to work on a new symphony. It would be his first in eight years, and he worked fast. Completed on October 25, 1953, the Tenth Symphony was first performed by Yevgeny Mravinsky and the Leningrad Philharmonic on December 17 of that year.

While the Tenth Symphony was much admired at its Western premiere in New York the following year, it touched off a firestorm in Russia, where it was regarded as a challenge to Soviet control of Russian artists. It is an imposing work, long (over 50 minutes) and somber. The Tenth is regarded as one of the finest of Shostakovich's 15 symphonies, yet it remains troubling and mysterious music.

The first movement is a *Moderato* that begins quietly with rising and falling patterns of three notes. These patterns, the thematic foundation of this huge (20-minute) movement, will reappear throughout the symphony. More animated material follows: a wistful tune for solo clarinet and a dark waltz for solo flute. These simple figures will explode violently across the span of this movement, which rises to a series of craggy climaxes.

The *Allegro* is brief – and brutal. The movement rips to life with frenzied energy, and then it does not stop, riding this frenzy until it vanishes on the whirlwind after four breathless minutes. Part of the legend surrounding this symphony is that this movement is a musical portrait of Stalin, but the composer's son Maxim has specifically denied this, calling those reports “rumors” and saying that “Father never said that it was a portrait of Stalin.”

After the fury of the second movement, the *Allegretto* begins almost whimsically – the marking is *dolce*. Very quickly we move to what is distinctive about this movement: one of the earliest appearances in Shostakovich's music of his musical signature, as high woodwinds toot out the four-note motto D-Eb-C-B. In German notation, E-flat is S and B is H, and the resulting motto spells DSCH, the composer's initials in their German spelling: Dmitri *Schostakovich*. Here it recurs so insistently that it seems Shostakovich's way of asserting his existence and his independence. The other distinctive feature of this movement is a mighty horn call that rings out 12 times across its span. This *Allegretto* is the most enigmatic movement of the symphony, and one senses a private drama being played out here.

The opening of the finale returns to the mood of the very beginning, with somber low strings beneath lonely woodwind cries. When this anguished mood has thoroughly darkened our sensibilities, Shostakovich suddenly shifts gears – solo clarinet offers a taut call to order, and the violins launch into an *Allegro* that drives all before it and pushes this symphony to an almost too-conventional happy ending. What are we to make of this conclusion, apparently shaped by the requisite high spirits of Socialist Realism and full of madcap energy, the scurrying of clowns, further declarations of the DSCH motto and an (apparently) optimistic close? It has certainly unsettled many listeners, who feel it a violation of the powerful music that preceded it.

If the finale bothered Western critics, it was the first three movements that worried those in Moscow. A conference was called there in the spring of 1954 to try to come to terms with music that was so politically incorrect. Some defended Shostakovich's right to compose as he chose, while the old guard offered the expected party bromides, denouncing the Tenth Symphony as "the tragedy of a profoundly isolated individual... Out of his purely personal and therefore narrow world he looks in horror at that evil and the cataclysms it wreaks and feels that he is helpless in the face of them. Such a conception of the world is very far from that which is experienced by the majority of the Soviet people." Shostakovich himself offered a spectacularly evasive comment, saying only that in this music he had wished "to portray human emotions and passions." When asked if he would provide a program for the symphony, he said, "No, let them listen and guess for themselves." After three days of debate, the conference came to a compromise approval of this music, declaring – after the sort of mental gymnastics possible only by a Soviet committee – that the Tenth Symphony represented "an optimistic tragedy."

The music remains enigmatic many years after that conference has drifted into history. How can we reconcile the icy darkness of so much of this music with the shouted-out declarations of personal independence... and *then* resolve both of these with that almost too-buoyant finale? The exact source of the power of Shostakovich's Tenth Symphony continues to elude our understanding, even as we are swept up in its somber strength.

**-Program notes by Eric Bromberger**

**PERFORMANCE HISTORY by Dr. Melvin G. Goldzband,**

**San Diego Symphony Archivist**

Richard Strauss's brilliant and evocative tone poem *Don Juan* was introduced to San Diego Symphony audiences when Zoltan Rozsnyai conducted it twice, once during the season of 1965-66 and again two seasons later. All told, it has been presented at these concerts nine times, most recently when Christof Perick conducted it in the 2011-12 season. The Tenth Symphony of Dmitri Shostakovich was introduced to San Diego Symphony audiences when Peter Erős conducted it during the 1974-75 season and repeated it during the 1980-81 season. All told, it has been played at these concerts six times, most recently when Pinchas Zukerman led a performance in the 2014-15 season. The Britten Symphony for Cello and Orchestra is being heard at San Diego Symphony concerts for the first time ever this weekend.