

**SAN DIEGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
**PAYARE CONDUCTS MOZART AND TCHAIKOVSKY**  
**A Jacobs Masterworks Special Concert**  
**Rafael Payare, conductor**

January 10, 2019

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART**    *Overture to Don Giovanni, K. 527*

**RICHARD STRAUSS**                      *Don Juan, Op. 20*

INTERMISSION

**PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY**            *Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33*  
[Fitzenhagen version]  
Alisa Weilerstein, cello

**MODEST MUSSORGSKY**                      *Pictures from an Exhibition*  
Originally for piano;  
Orch. Maurice Ravel, 1922

Promenade  
1. Gnomus  
Promenade  
2. The Old Castle  
Promenade  
3. Tuileries  
4. Bydlo  
Promenade  
5. Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells  
6. Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle  
7. Limoges  
8. Catacombs  
Cum mortuis in lingua mortua  
9. The Hut on Fowl's Legs  
10. The Great Gate of Kiev

**Overture to *Don Giovanni*, K. 527**  
WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART  
Born January 27, 1756, Salzburg  
Died December 5, 1791, Vienna

Mozart's *Don Giovanni* has always been a favorite with audiences. Good triumphs in the end, but all the way through we're rooting for the bad guy, and his defiance even as he is dragged into the sulphurous pit of hell is what we remember as morality seems to establish itself at the end. Mozart had worked on the opera across most of 1787, and he arrived in Prague early in October to prepare for the premiere, scheduled for October 19. But too many details of the new opera were not quite ready, so *The Marriage of Figaro* – a great favorite in Prague – was performed instead on that date, and the premiere of *Don Giovanni* was re-scheduled for October 29.

But there remained a problem. As that premiere approached, the opera still had no overture, at least on paper. Mozart, as was his habit, had composed the overture in his head, but – with other things to do – had not got around to the purely mechanical task of writing it down. Now, on the night before either the premiere or the dress rehearsal (accounts vary), he finally *had* to get it on paper. Years later, his widow Constanze recalled what happened that night. She mixed him a pitcher of punch, and he wrote as fast as he could, while she amused him with fairy tales from *The Arabian Nights*. Soon, she observed, he was laughing so hard that tears ran down his face, but he kept writing. Finally, his exertions (and the punch) got the better of him, and he fell asleep on a couch. The copyist was due at 7 a.m., and Constanze let her husband sleep until 5, then woke him, and he had the manuscript complete when the copyist arrived to take it.

The work of that copyist was pretty impressive on its own. He had all the parts ready that night, and the Prague orchestra – without time to rehearse – simply sight-read the overture on that occasion. That orchestra must have been terrific: Mozart later said of the overture, “A few notes did fall under the desks, but it was a fine performance.”

It was customary to compose an opera overture on themes that the audience would later hear in the opera, but Mozart only partially observes that practice in his overture for *Don Giovanni*. He draws the overture's dramatic slow introduction from the opera's climax, when the statue of the Commendatore comes back to life and accepts the Don's invitation to dinner. The overture opens with ringing chords in D minor, a key Mozart associated with revenge, and the

slow introduction also includes the rising-and-falling lines that will be heard at that climactic moment. But for the main body of the overture, which he marks *Allegro molto*, Mozart moves to D Major and composes entirely new music. Curiously, this theme bears a strong resemblance to the *Allegro* of the first movement of Mozart's *Prague* Symphony, written a year earlier when he visited that city for the premiere of *The Marriage of Figaro*. Was Mozart making a nod toward a city that had treated him with far more respect than Vienna had? Perhaps, but the important point is that this *Allegro molto* is exactly right at this point in the overture – its shining D Major tonality and its surging strength have reminded some of Don Giovanni himself, even if this music will never reappear in the opera. Mozart constructs this part of the overture in sonata form, complete with secondary material, development and full recapitulation, and this fiery music races forward with a vitality all its own. In the opera, this energy resolves quietly into Leporello's "Notte e giorno faticar," but for separate performance in the concert hall Mozart wrote a concert ending that brings the overture to a suitably dramatic close.

### ***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.

***Variations on a Rococo Theme, Op. 33***

**[Fitzenhagen version]**

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born May 7, 1840, Votkinsk

Died November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg

It is hard to believe that Tchaikovsky wrote this lovely, elegant, chaste music immediately after completing his overwrought *Francesca da Rimini* and immediately before his white-hot Fourth Symphony. That sequence alone should alert us to the fact that there were many sides to this often tormented composer. If we automatically identify Tchaikovsky with colorful and emotional music, we need to remember that he was also drawn to the formal clarity of 18<sup>th</sup> century music and loved Mozart above all other composers. One of the finest examples of this attraction is his *Variations on a Rococo Theme*, composed in December 1876, shortly after Tchaikovsky returned to Moscow after attending the first performance of Wagner's *Ring* at Bayreuth.

This was a very difficult time for Tchaikovsky. He was on the verge of entering into a disastrous marriage with one of his students. He hoped that such a union would “cure” him of his homosexuality, but secretly he must have known that that was hopeless. Writing this music may have offered him an escape from that personal turmoil into the clarity and order of another era. The immediate impulse to write it came in a commission from the cellist Wilhelm Fitzenhagen. Trained in Germany, Fitzenhagen had in 1870 become professor at the Imperial Conservatory in Moscow, where Tchaikovsky also taught, and the two men had become good friends. When Fitzenhagen asked Tchaikovsky to write a piece for cello and orchestra for him, the composer responded with a set of variations based on what he called a “rococo” theme and scored for what was essentially Mozart's orchestra (pairs of woodwinds and horns, plus strings).

A briefly orchestral introduction (how light and clear this music sounds!) gives way to the entrance of the solo cello, which sings the “rococo” theme. That theme (Tchaikovsky's own) is marked *espressivo* on its first appearance, and it falls into two eight-bar phrases. Seven variations follow. These are nicely contrasted: some are lyric, some athletic. Some emphasize the cello, while others vigorously toss the theme between soloist and orchestra. Tchaikovsky varies key and meter throughout the set, and he ingeniously turns the final variation into an exciting

coda. Yet the key word throughout is “restraint,” and this gentle score seems to come from a different planet altogether from the Fourth Symphony, which would shortly follow.

A CURIOUS NOTE: Tchaikovsky worked closely with Fitzenhagen while composing the *Rococo Variations*, and the writing for cello is graceful and idiomatic. But Fitzenhagen, a composer himself, apparently regarded Tchaikovsky’s manuscript as only a starting point, and he drastically revised the score. He reduced Tchaikovsky’s original eight variations to seven, altered the order of the variations and re-wrote some of the cello part. By the time of the premiere, which took place in Moscow on December 1877, Tchaikovsky had made the fateful marriage, abandoned his wife and fled to Switzerland to restore his mental balance. He had no idea that these changes had been made, and by the time he returned to Moscow in 1879, the music had been published in Fitzenhagen’s revision. At this point it was virtually impossible for him to re-do these changes. The result is that the *Rococo Variations* are invariably performed today in Fitzenhagen’s revised version rather than in the version Tchaikovsky actually wrote.

### ***Pictures from an Exhibition***

**(orchestrated by Maurice Ravel)**

MODEST MUSSORGSKY

Born March 21, 1839, Karevo

Died March 28, 1881, St. Petersburg

In the summer of 1873, Modest Mussorgsky was stunned by the sudden death of his friend Victor Hartmann, an architect and artist who was then only 39. The following year, their mutual friend Vladimir Stassov arranged a showing of over 400 of Hartmann’s watercolors, sketches, drawings and designs. Inspired by the exhibition and the memory of his friend, Mussorgsky set to work on a suite of piano pieces based on the pictures and wrote enthusiastically to Stassov: “Hartmann is bubbling over, just as *Boris* did. Ideas, melodies, come to me of their own accord, like the roast pigeons in the story – I gorge and gorge and overeat myself. I can hardly manage to put it all down on paper fast enough.” He worked fast indeed: beginning on June 2, 1874, Mussorgsky had the score complete three weeks later, on June 22, just a few months after the premiere of *Boris Godunov*.

The finished work, which he called *Pictures from an Exhibition*, consists of ten musical portraits bound together by a promenade theme that recurs periodically – Mussorgsky said that this theme, meant to depict the gallery-goer strolling between paintings, was a portrait of

himself. Curiously, *Pictures* spent its first half-century in obscurity. It was not performed publically during Mussorgsky's lifetime, it was not published until 1886 (five years after its composer's death), and it did not really enter the standard piano repertory until several decades after that: the earliest recording of the piano version did not take place until 1942. Even early listeners were struck by the "orchestral" sonorities of this piano score, and in 1922 conductor Serge Koussevitzky asked Maurice Ravel to orchestrate it. Koussevitzky gave the first performance of Ravel's version at the Paris Opera on October 19, 1922, and that quickly became one of the most popular works in the orchestral repertory: today over 60 different versions are available on compact disc.

The opening *Promenade* alternates 5/4 and 6/4 meters; Mussorgsky marks it "in the Russian manner," and Ravel assigns the famous opening to the solo trumpet, quickly joined by the full brass section. *Gnomus* is a portrait of a gnome staggering on twisted legs; the following *Promenade* is marked "with delicacy." In Hartmann's watercolor *The Old Castle*, a minstrel sings before a ruined castle. Ravel makes a daring (and very effective) choice by assigning his song to a solo saxophone, whose mournful sound feels exactly right in this context. *Tuileries* is a watercolor of children playing and quarreling in the Paris park; Ravel portrays them with chattering woodwinds. *Bydlo* returns to Eastern Europe, where a heavy ox-cart grinds through the mud. The wheels pound ominously along as the driver sings, and Ravel assigns his song to the euphonium. The music rises to a strident climax as the cart draws near and passes, then diminishes as the cart moves on. Mussorgsky wanted the following *Promenade* to sound *tranquillo*, and Ravel begins with the clear sound of high flutes, but gradually this *Promenade* takes on unexpected power. *The Ballet of the Chicks in Their Shells* depicts Hartmann's costume design for the ballet *Trilby*, in which these characters wore egg-shaped armor – Ravel captures the sound of the chicks with chirping grace-notes in the woodwinds.

"I meant to get Hartmann's Jews," said Mussorgsky of *Samuel Goldenberg and Schmuyle*, a portrait of two Jews – one rich and one poor – in animated conversation. Ravel gives each of them a particular sound: the rich voice of Goldenberg is heard in the strings, while Schmuyle's rapid, high voice is depicted by a trumpet solo, one of the most famous ever composed for that instrument. *Limoges* shows Frenchwomen quarreling furiously in a market, while *Catacombs* is Hartmann's portrait of himself surveying the Roman catacombs by lantern light; Ravel makes effective use of deep brass and woodwinds here. This section leads into *Cum*

*mortuis in lingua mortua*: “With the dead in a dead language.” Mussorgsky noted of this section: “The spirit of the departed Hartmann leads me to the skulls and invokes them: the skulls begin to glow faintly”; embedded in this spooky passage is a minor-key variation of the *Promenade* theme. *The Hut on Fowl’s Legs* shows the hut (perched on hen’s legs) of the vicious witch Baba Yaga, who would fly through the skies in a red-hot mortar. Ravel’s version depicts her with slashing attacks for full orchestra. Mussorgsky has her fly scorchingly right into the final movement, *The Great Gate of Kiev*. Hartmann had designed a gate (never built) for the city of Kiev, and Mussorgsky’s brilliant finale transforms the genial *Promenade* theme into a heaven-storming conclusion. Ravel gives the first statement to a noble brass choir, then gradually builds to one of the most exciting orchestral sounds ever created, full of ringing bells and massed attacks.

A NOTE ON THE RAVEL ORCHESTRATION: So famous has Ravel’s orchestration of *Pictures from an Exhibition* become that it is regarded as a virtual treatise on orchestration all by itself. Yet, some observers have had doubts about it, and listeners may be surprised to learn that there are at least ten other orchestral versions by such varied names as Mikhail Tuschmaloff, Sir Henry Wood, Leo Funtek, Leopold Stokowski, Serge Gortchakoff and others. Pianist-conductor Vladimir Ashkenazy, who has prepared a version of his own, makes an interesting point: effective as Ravel’s orchestration is, it gives this essentially Russian music a distinctly “French” sound – light, bright and brilliant. Ashkenazy set out to restore a “Russian” sound to *Pictures*, and his version is much darker and heavier, making the music sound unexpectedly somber. Ashkenazy has a point, but after nearly 100 years of performances it is difficult to separate this music from Ravel’s superb orchestration, which is a creative act fully worthy of Mussorgsky’s original score.

**-Program notes by Eric Bromberger**