

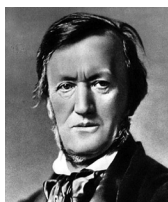
notes

October 21/22

TCHAIKOVSKY'S *SWAN LAKE*

By Dr. Richard E. Rodda

30 SECOND NOTES: The conflict between the seductive Venus and the virtuous Elisabeth for the life, love and soul of the title character in Wagner's *Tannhäuser* is distilled in the opera's dramatic overture. Strauss' tone poem *Death and Transfiguration* traces what the composer called "the last hours of a man who had striven for the highest ideals, presumably an artist." Our 80th Season, *Music in Motion*, continues with Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, which is now among the most popular of all ballets, though it was only a modest success during its initial run at the Moscow Bolshoi and never received another complete production during the composer's remaining sixteen years. 🎵



RICHARD WAGNER

**Born May 22, 1813 in Leipzig;
died February 13, 1883 in Venice.**

OVERTURE TO *TANNHÄUSER* (1845)

- First performed on October 19, 1845 in Dresden, conducted by the composer.
- These concerts mark the first performances of this piece by the Des Moines Symphony.

(Duration: ca. 14 minutes)

Wagner's *Tannhäuser* opens in a grotto in the Venusberg, the mountain where Venus, the goddess of love, is said by German legend to have taken refuge after the fall of ancient civilization. Tannhäuser has forsaken the world to enjoy her sensual pleasures, but after a year he longs to return home and find forgiveness. He

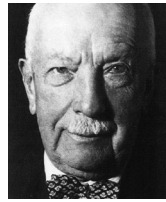
invokes the name of the Virgin Mary, and the Venusberg is swallowed by darkness.

Tannhäuser finds himself in a valley below Wartburg Castle, where he is passed by a band of pilgrims journeying to Rome. His friend Wolfram recognizes him, tells him how Elisabeth, his betrothed, has grieved during his absence, and invites him to the Wartburg to see her and to take part in a singing contest. Elisabeth is joyous at Tannhäuser's return, and they reassure each other of their love. At the contest, however, Tannhäuser sings a rhapsody to Venus and the pleasures of carnal love that so enrages the assembled knights and ladies that Elisabeth must protect him from their threats of violence. Tannhäuser agrees to join the pilgrims to atone for his sins. Several months later, he returns from Rome, alone, haggard and in rags. He tells Wolfram that the Pope has said it is as impossible for someone who has dwelled in the Venusberg to be forgiven as for the Papal staff to

sprout leaves. He considers going again to Venus, but withstands that temptation when Wolfram mentions Elisabeth's name. Elisabeth, however, not knowing of Tannhäuser's return and despairing of ever seeing her lover again, has died of grief. Her bier is carried past Tannhäuser, who kneels next to it, and also dies. As morning dawns, pilgrims from Rome arrive bearing the Pope's staff, which has miraculously grown leaves.

The Overture to *Tannhäuser* encapsulates in musical terms the dramatic conflict between the sacred love of Elisabeth and the profane love of Venus. Wagner wrote of it, "At first the orchestra introduces us to the *Pilgrims' Chorus* alone. It approaches, swells to a mighty outpouring, and finally passes into the distance. As night falls, magic visions show themselves. A rosy mist swirls upward, and the blurred motions of a fearsomely voluptuous dance are revealed.... This is the seductive magic of the Venusberg. Lured by the tempting vision, Tannhäuser draws near. It is Venus herself who appears to him.... In drunken joy the Bacchantes rush upon him and draw him into their wild dance.... The storm subsides. Only a soft, sensuous moan lingers in the air where the unholy ecstasy held sway. Yet already the morning dawns: from the far distance the *Pilgrim's Chorus* is heard again. As it draws ever nearer and day repulses night, those lingering moans are transfigured into a murmur of joy so that when the sun rises the pilgrims' chorus proclaims salvation to all the world."

The score calls for flutes, oboes, clarinets and bassoons in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tambourine and the usual strings consisting of first violins, second violins, violas, violoncellos and double basses.



RICHARD STRAUSS

Born June 11, 1864 in Munich; died September 8, 1949 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen.

DEATH AND TRANSFIGURATION, Op. 24 (1890)

- First performed on October June 21, 1890 in Eisenach, conducted by the composer.
- First performed by the Des Moines Symphony on February 5 & 6, 1977 with Yuri Krasnapolsky conducting. One subsequent performance occurred on May 13 & 14, 1995 with Joseph Giunta conducting.

(Duration: ca. 26 minutes)

Death and Transfiguration was completed just in time for Richard Strauss' 26th birthday. It is a remarkable achievement both in conception and execution for such a young musician, especially since composition was really just a second career for Strauss at the time. By 1887, Strauss was one of the fastest-rising stars in the European conducting firmament, having taken up his first podium engagement at the tender age of nineteen as assistant to the renowned Hans von Bülow at Meiningen. Appointments at the opera houses of Munich, Bayreuth and Weimar, as well as a guest visit to conduct the greatest orchestra of the time, the Berlin Philharmonic, all preceded the premiere of *Death and Transfiguration* in June 1890. Strauss' schedule was hectic, and it is a tribute to his stamina and ambition that he was able to balance two full-time careers with such excellent success. Throughout his life he remained one of the most highly regarded and sought-after conductors in the world, reaching the pinnacle of his acclaim when he was appointed director of the Vienna Opera in 1919.

It was at his first conducting post that Strauss began composing his tone poems. *Death*

and Transfiguration was the third of these, following *Macbeth* (1887) and *Don Juan* (1888). The literary inspiration for *Death and Transfiguration* originated with Strauss himself, as he noted in a letter to his friend Friedrich von Hausegger in 1894: “It was six years ago when the idea came to me to write a tone poem describing the last hours of a man who had striven for the highest ideals, presumably an artist. The sick man lies in his bed breathing heavily and irregularly in his sleep. Friendly dreams bring a smile to his face; his sleep grows lighter; he awakens. Fearful pains once more begin to torture him, fever shakes his body. When the attack is over and the pain recedes, he recalls his past life; his childhood passes before his eyes; his youth with its strivings and passions; and then, when the pain returns, there appears to him the goal of his life’s journey — the idea, the ideal which he attempted to embody in his art, but which he was unable to perfect because such perfection could be achieved by no man. The fatal hour arrives. The soul leaves his body, to discover in the eternal cosmos the magnificent realization of the ideal which could not be fulfilled here below.”

Strauss’ composition follows his literary program with almost clinical precision. It is divided into four sections. The first summons the vision of the sickroom and the irregular heartbeat and distressed sighs of the man/artist. The second section, in a faster tempo, is a vivid and violent portrayal of his suffering. The ensuing, slower section, beginning tenderly and representing the artist’s remembrance of his life, is broken off suddenly when the anguished music of the second part returns. This ultimate, painful struggle ends in death, signified by a stroke of the gong. The final section, hymnal in mood, depicts the artist’s vision of ultimate beauty as he is transfigured into part of “the eternal cosmos.”

The score calls for three flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, tam-tam, two harps and the usual strings.



PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

**Born May 7, 1840 in
Votkinsk, Russia;
died November 6, 1893
in St. Petersburg.**

MUSIC FROM *SWAN LAKE* (1877)

- First performed on March 4, 1877 in Moscow, conducted by Stepan Ryabov.
 - These concerts mark the first Masterworks performances of this suite by the Des Moines Symphony, compiled by Joseph Giunta.
- (Duration: ca. 40 minutes)*

During the years after Tchaikovsky took up his faculty position at the Moscow Conservatory in 1866, he fell in with a group of young men who unblushingly called themselves the Artistic Circle of Moscow, an informal tavern society whose members met regularly to impress each other with their theories of art and their capacity for alcohol. Among the Artistic Circle were Vladimir Begichev, stage manager of the Bolshoi Ballet, and Vasily Geltser, one of that company’s leading dancers. Early in 1875, they conceived a new ballet for which their companion, Tchaikovsky, then the author of two symphonies, the tone poem *Romeo and Juliet* and a brand new piano concerto, would provide the music. Tchaikovsky liked the idea. Begichev, on behalf of the directors of the Imperial Theaters of Moscow, offered him 800 rubles to write the music; the libretto, based on German legend and Russian supernatural tales, was devised by Begichev, Geltser and the composer and titled *Swan Lake*. Tchaikovsky agreed to start the score as soon as

he finished his *Third Symphony* during the summer break from his Conservatory classes.

Little is known about the composition of *Swan Lake*, though Tchaikovsky admitted to Rimsky-Korsakov that he did it “partly for the sake of the money, which I need, and partly because I wanted to try myself in this kind of music.” Tchaikovsky began the music in August 1875, and the first two acts were sketched in a fortnight. The rest of the score came more slowly, however, hampered by Tchaikovsky’s classroom duties, and was not completed until the following April. Almost a full year passed before *Swan Lake* was staged. The choreography for the premiere, on March 4, 1877 at the Moscow Bolshoi Theater, was created by the company’s dance master, Julius Reisinger, “whose limitations as a choreographer seem to have been almost boundless,” according to Tchaikovsky’s biographer David Brown. Stepan Ryabov, whom Modeste criticized as a “semi-amateur” and incapable of grasping the symphonic nature of his brother’s score, was assigned to prepare the orchestra. The rest of the production was treated with equal carelessness (Edwin Evans said the premiere was “more or less pitchforked onto the stage”), so it is small wonder that *Swan Lake* made little impression on the first-night audience and critics. *Swan Lake* stayed in the Bolshoi repertory until the costumes fell apart in 1883, and, except for a staging in Prague of Act II in 1888, when Tchaikovsky met Dvořák, the ballet was not seen again during its composer’s lifetime. It was not until a lovingly prepared production at St. Petersburg’s Maryinsky Theater on January 27, 1895, more than a year after Tchaikovsky’s death, that *Swan Lake* was finally recognized as one of his masterpieces. It has ever since been among the most popular of all evening-length ballets.

Act I of *Swan Lake* is a festival celebrating the coming of age of Prince Siegfried the following

day, when he must choose a bride. Attracted by a flight of swans over the castle, Siegfried and his friends form a hunting party and leave the festivity. At the beginning of Act II, Siegfried arrives at the lake to see the swans, led by Odette, the Swan Queen, glide across the surface. Just as Siegfried is about to unleash his crossbow, Odette appears to him not in avian form, but as a beautiful princess. She tells him that she and the other swan-maidens live under a curse by the evil magician Rothbart that lets them take human shape just from midnight to dawn. The spell can be broken, she says, only by one who promises to love her and no other. Though Rothbart vows to undo them both, Siegfried promises his love to Odette. Act III is again set in the castle. Amid the birthday celebration, Rothbart, in disguise, suddenly enters with his daughter, Odile, who appears to Siegfried in the exact image of Odette. Odette, hovering at the window, tries to warn Siegfried of the deception, but to no avail. Siegfried asks for Odile’s hand in marriage. Rothbart and Odile exult in their vile triumph. Siegfried realizes he has been trapped. Odette seems doomed. In Act IV, Odette returns to the lake, prepared to kill herself. The other maidens urge her to wait for the Prince. He appears, and again vows his love to her, but she knows that Rothbart’s power can only be broken by death. She throws herself from the parapet of a lakeside fortress. Siegfried, his life meaningless without her, follows. Rothbart’s enchantment is destroyed by the power of love. At the final curtain, Odette and Siegfried are seen sailing off together on a beautiful, celestial ship, united forever.

The score calls for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two cornets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, bass drum, cymbals, tambourine, castanets, harp and the usual strings.