

EL PASO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA  
JANUARY 24 & 25, 2025  
PROGRAM NOTES

**Richard Strauss**

Born June 11, 1864 — Munich, Germany

Died September 8, 1949 — Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Germany

***Don Juan***

Richard Strauss wrote close to 300 works but is recognized today for only a small handful of them. Twenty-six of Strauss' pieces see the stage today, 16 of them operas. However, Strauss' legendary status within late romanticism comes primarily from his most groundbreaking music: Tone poems.

Tone poems are themed music performed by an orchestra, free from staging. Typically based on preexisting material such as books, poems, or plays, they provide music to source material that never had it, and the genre would rise in popularity throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. No one would show dominance of the tone poem more than Richard Strauss, not for number, but for explosive technique and sonic assault.

*Don Juan, Op. 20* is the second and most famous of Strauss' ten tone poems. Composed in 1888 with Strauss in his mid-twenties, it was the push that sent the composer's career sprinting forward.

Strauss chose the source material for *Don Juan* from the 17<sup>th</sup> century play of the same name. Don Juan is a character that has reappeared many times throughout the history of art and literature—a man who dedicates himself to the seduction of women. Strauss vaguely but brilliantly gives us a sonic overview of the character's life and fate, all in under 20 minutes. The piece begins brightly and spirited as the confident nature of Don Juan is explored, but gradually transitions to tension and melancholy with a dark and quiet ending representing the character's death.

As ingenious as this masterpiece is, it does not come without cost. Strauss' orchestral music is universally challenging due to the composer's disregard for instrumental (and personnel) limitations. *Don Juan*, in particular, is seen by many to be the most difficult piece ever written for orchestra.

**Ludwig van Beethoven**

Born December 17, 1770 — Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827 — Vienna, Austria

***Piano Concerto No. 3, op. 37, C minor***

Almost all of the genres that Ludwig Van Beethoven chose to write within demonstrate the remarkable changes the composer underwent as he progressed through his career. His early period was an exciting approach on the styles and practices of the time, but with a flair and aggression that foreshadowed what was to come. The finale of Beethoven's "classical" self-came with the premiere of *Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor, Op. 37*.

The timeframes for Beethoven's earliest 19<sup>th</sup> century works can be confusing. Many of his pieces from years earlier were just then seeing their premieres, all while Beethoven was hard at work creating new material that was gradually gaining complexity. For example, his *Symphony No. 1* was premiered in 1801 but was composed starting in 1795 at the latest. Meanwhile, Beethoven was a drastically different composer in 1801 compared to the decade before, and well on his way to chaining the world.

As was common with Beethoven once he moved to Vienna, the concerts where he premiered new works were massive. The premiere of *Piano Concerto No. 3* came in 1803 and was billed alongside the premieres of *Symphony No. 2* and *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. This was an obscenely large and risky project given none of these works had been played before.

Beethoven performed the solo part from *Piano Concerto No. 3* himself. A good thing, too, for the part's notation was not yet complete, forcing the composer to play his own music by memory.

The concerto, along with the entire concert, was not well received. Whether or not this was due to Beethoven's bad habit of programming concerts out of the reach of the performers given the time restraints, we will never know. However, Beethoven's work would win the long game, despite often rough beginnings.

### ***Symphony No. 3, op. 55, E-flat major (Eroica)***

Being a composer whose life and career is studied in parts, *Symphony No. 3* is a bookmark in Beethoven's output that is the highest of importance.

The majority of Beethoven's most cherished and popular works come from his "middle period," which began around the composer's 30<sup>th</sup> year. *Symphony No. 5* and the *Moonlight Sonata* are prime examples and their overture? *Eroica*.

*Symphony No. 3 in E flat major, Op. 55, 'Eroica'* was begun in 1802 and wouldn't see its public premiere until 1805 in Vienna. Its time in construction hints at its nature—over 50 minutes is needed for performance, which is nearly twice as long as what was expected for the genre. But uniqueness didn't stop there, the form, harmonies, and rhythms were more complicated than anything Beethoven (or anyone else) had written.

The unprecedented nature of the piece did not come without consequences. Rehearsals, being rare for the time period, began poorly in 1804. The difficulty of the music was a shock for the orchestra, which led to a disastrous first run-through. With Beethoven as conductor and his temper well known throughout the industry, the rants and tyrannical critiques of the musicians involved now survive as legendary Beethoven tales. Today these technical consequences still present themselves, for the common opinion of experienced Beethoven performers is *Symphony No. 3* is the most difficult of the composer's nine.

*Eroica's* dedication is almost as famous as the music itself. Possessing a well-read political mind, Beethoven was, for a time, a stalwart supporter of Napoleon Bonaparte, who at the turn of the century was capturing the world's attention via his roles within the French Revolution and European anti-monarchical philosophies. Beethoven's original plan was to dedicate the symphony to the conqueror,

but multiple instances did not allow this to come to fruition. Firstly, Beethoven realized a major financial gain by dedicating the work to a patron instead. Secondly, Beethoven had become infuriated by Napoleon by 1804—Bonaparte’s self-declaration as the emperor of France scored Europe's ire, along with Beethoven’s, a displeasure that can actually be physically seen today. While Beethoven’s first completed draft is lost, the oldest known copy by his hand contains two large blotches of black ink. They are the original Napoleon dedications, furiously scribbled out.

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