

Abstract

For this project, I am analyzing the moments of narrative and character roles within Richard Strauss's tone poem, Don Juan. Throughout this project I will be delving into what could be considered the 'peak' of the classical era and how Strauss paved the way for future composed music. Beginning with the first sounds that we hear, there are narrative moments at play that, if overlooked, will hinder a listener's experience later in the piece. By referencing the score, I will give specific examples and explanations for how Strauss tied instrument timbres, articulations, rhythms, and orchestrations to characters within the storyline.

Questions examined:

1. What are the defining features and characteristics of the musical dialogue?
2. What are the defining personified instruments in *Don Juan*?
3. What impact do personified instruments have on musical context?

Score Outline

Audio Timestamps

Example 1 - Opening of <i>Don Juan</i> dialogue	00:00
Example 2 - First Horn Solo	02:28
Example 3 - Flute Solo	05:40
Example 4 - Oboe Solo	06:41
Example 5 - Don Juan's Theme	10:00
Example 6 - English Horn Solo	12:38
Example 7 - Horn Section Soli	14:35
Example 8 - Hints of Wedding March	15:10-15:23

The opening line of *Don Juan* can be classified as a more modernistic approach than what had normally been heard in this era. Composed in its entirety in 1888, *Don Juan* contained several new ideas of orchestration that had not been used before his time (Kaunitz, 2012). Multiple sources can agree that “Strauss drew upon the story of Don Juan, which is a tale of a fictitious character, whose amorous adventures, his larger than life energy, and his indifference to societal norms, made him the hero-villain of numerous plays, novels, and poems from the 1660s to the 1900s” (Kaunitz, 2021). Don Juan originated in popular legend as a symbol of libertinism and first made an appearance in *El Burlador de Seville* back in 1630 which translates to “The Seducer of Seville” which can be attributed to the dramatist Tirso de Molina. From this legend, Don Juan becomes the heroic villain of the poems, novels, and plays.

Music historian Bryan Gilliam writes, “Don Juan is a musical composition that aims to portray in musical terms the events, characters, [and] scenes that usually originate in a poem or a story” (Gilliam, 1999). In this essay, I will examine the musical meaning of the narrative in Strauss's *Don Juan*. I will explain the logic of using certain instruments and how the overall orchestration plays a major role in the narrative delineation. There are many articles out there that may differ in opinion, such as <https://houstonsymphony.org/strauss-don-juan/>. I encourage every reader to listen and discover new interpretations of this fantastic tone poem.

The first impactful narrative moment happens in measure one. With the opening notes and rhythms

The image shows a page of a musical score for the beginning of Strauss's tone poem 'Don Juan'. The tempo is marked 'Allegro molto con brio.' The score is for a full orchestra and includes the following parts: 2 Flutes (2 Flöten), 3 Flutes (3 Flöte, also Piccolo), 2 Oboes (2 Oboen.), English Horn (Englisch Horn), 2 Clarinets in A (2 Clarinetten in A), 2 Bassoons (2 Fagotte), Contrabassoon (Contrafagott), 4 Horns in E (1.2. and 3.4. Horns in E), 3 Trumpets in E (1.2. and 3. Trumpets in E), 3 Trombones (1.2. and 3. Trombone, with the 3rd being a Tuba), and 3 Percussion (3 Pauken E. H. C.). The score features a prominent triplet rhythm in the brass section, which is a key characteristic of the piece.

you can hear how Strauss made use of brass, woodwind, and string triplet unison lines that will be carried throughout the entirety of the piece (Example 1, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_um5yLJx-RM). The use of these strong triplet-brass figures gives the listener a strong and heroic emotion. Throughout *Don Juan*, these triplet-brass figures come back as subtle references that the alleged hero, Don Juan, is present. Throughout most of the solo passages, the triplet figures are used more as a moment of conversation between Don Juan and another character. Very few composers have used this same technique throughout an

entire composition, but Strauss had already seemed to master this new twentieth-century technique at such a young age.

Strauss associates the heroic, but mellow, solo horn and softer dynamics to portray Don Juan revealing his more seductive side to his lady.

(Example 2, https://youtu.be/_um5yLJx-RM?t=147),



Since the horn has always been associated with hunting, heroic characters, and moments of courageous characters, Strauss used the horn in this tone-poem to signify to a listener that Don Juan is in fact in the scene. Without a visual aid, Strauss was still able to capture the presence of a character with the use of instruments. A few minutes into the tone poem, Strauss makes use of the oboe and horn in a duet. With the oboe representing the female character and the horn representing Don Juan, Strauss paints a passionate picture of two star-crossed lovers. This newfound thematic material is then passed from horn and oboe to the strings and woodwinds to symbolize harmony between the two lovers.

About a third of the way into the recording of *Don Juan*, we get brand-new thematic material from the string section of the orchestra. This new dark section of the piece is all about Don Juan and the glimpse of the hardships he must endure when trying to be the figure in Doña Ana's life, who is then represented in the flute solo. With the string section using full bows, legato phrases, and a shift in tonality, Strauss gives us the feeling of anxiety. As the flute solo enters

(Example 3, https://youtu.be/_um5yLJx-RM?t=340),



which sounds quite playful in nature, every listener should be cautious, as a listener may have a feeling of anxiety that switches to hope, a feeling of hope that transitions to defiance, and defiance that ultimately leads to unknowingness.

Given the situation, the oboe solo (Example 4, https://youtu.be/_um5yLJx-RM?t=450)

can represent a loved one giving hope, or a lover trying to lift the spirit of Don Juan after the family struggle encompasses him. Thinking about each instrument being a different character, it is easy to imagine a conversation between all of them. The trade-offs from oboe to horn solos give us the impression that a slow, flirtatious conversation occurs. Throughout this piece, we have heard Strauss's use of big brass fanfare-esque type music, but this is the first glimpse of a muted horn part. This can be interpreted as Don Juan being almost calmed down or being swept

off his feet by his beautiful lover. Instead of the pompous heroic character, this is the first time we see Don Juan's soft side.

After exchanging words, the overwhelming string section takes the lead and strikes us with a buildup of emotion, following Don Juan's current emotions. The next moment in the music narrative belabors us with the feeling of hope, aspiration, and ambition toward the feelings of Don Juan and his future with his lover. Soon after, the horn section (Example 5, https://youtu.be/_um5yLJx-RM?t=601)



floods the listener with overwhelming power and strength. As the horn section plays Don Juan's theme, a listener might interpret the soli as a monumental win for Don Juan as he attempts to finally win over his lover. Some may also perceive this main theme as the heroic side of Don Juan that comes to rescue his beloved Doña Ana from her miseries. Doña Ana's personality makes an appearance, the oboe, in between both horn section interjections (for example, at 10:20 in the recording). The oboe interjections could be heard as unsureness and caution toward Don Juan, so instead of gently guiding Doña Ana in his direction, Don Juan boasts his theme again. As Don Juan's theme is heard a second time, a listener can only imagine it as Don Juan forcefully convincing Doña Ana to run away with him and leave her past behind. With the only obstacle separating the two lovers being family, the decision is tough for Doña Ana. The tone poem continues with the battle between Don Juan and the family of Doña Ana.

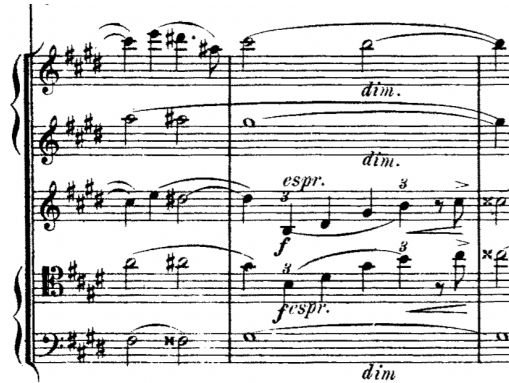
The entrance of the English horn solo (Example 6, https://youtu.be/_um5yLJx-RM?t=758)



takes over and can be interpreted as the intense emotions felt by Don Juan as the situation grows. As the plot thickens within the musical use of darker sounding chords, the drama also takes a turn for the worst. Strauss later uses the melody and harmony from the beginning of the piece, to give the audience the perception that Don Juan solved all of his problems by killing the father of his lover (Waxman, 1908), Doña Ana. As Don Juan's theme comes back in a new key (Example 7, https://youtu.be/_um5yLJx-RM?t=875)



the final note from the horn section reaches the tonic of the chord implying Don Juan has won and the audience can be filled with an overwhelming amount of joy and happiness. Strauss even goes as far as writing in moments of allegory with his five-note hint at *Wedding March* by Mendelssohn from a *Midsummer Night's Dream* into this section (Example 8, https://youtu.be/_um5yLJx-RM?t=910).



As the “honeymoon phase” continues throughout the penultimate section, it comes to an abrupt halt with a fermata, leaving the audience full of anticipation of the story to come.

As many good things must come to an end, Don Juan will soon meet his match. Immediately following the fermata at 16:25, we are greeted with an A-minor chord, which gives us a rather eerie feeling. Richard Strauss then orchestrates the low brass and bass instruments to signify God’s denial of Don Juan’s salvation, which results in his death and eternal damnation. Strauss’s use of the last three quarter notes might signal the downfall of Don Juan and the final beats of his own heart.

The best narrative moments happen when the audience imagines the characters and their emotions attached to them. Reminiscing in their past, a listener can recall previous heartbreaks or previous lovers when personifying these powerful musical moments. As Strauss makes use of different instruments for different characters, he also uses instruments to represent powerful emotions. The more technical harmonized passages refer to the mysterious side of Don Juan and hope to make an audience feel anxious. Strauss then counters the technical side with the lyrical passages and solo works that are used to bring out the opposite reaction in an audience. These more expressive interjections of Don Juan are used to represent the sweet, but heroic, side of

Don Juan. *Don Juan* by Strauss was not only a great piece of music literature to listen to but created some of the most profound narrative moments in musical history.

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