RICHARD STRAUSS
Don Quixote, Op. 35
Introduction
Theme and variations
Finale

**Born:** June 11, 1864, in Munich
**Died:** September 8, 1949, in Garmish-Partenkirchen, Bavaria
**Work composed:** 1897
**World premiere:** March 8, 1898, in Cologne. Friedrich Grützmacher was the cello soloist, and Franz Wüllner conducted.

Richard Strauss was by no means the first composer to find inspiration in the seriously comic story of Don Quixote. Well over a century before Strauss was born, Purcell and Telemann had based works on Miguel de Cervantes’ novel, which had appeared in 1605, and the tale has fueled the imaginations of many other musicians since then. But there is little question that Strauss' "Fantastic Variations on a Theme of Knightly Character," as his orchestral treatment is subtitled, forms the most elaborate and richly detailed attempt to portray in music the adventures of the deranged Don.

Strauss wrote this work in 1897, more than a decade after he had consciously abandoned the abstract forms of sonata and symphony in favor of composing to literary programs. His models for this new procedure were the tone poems of Franz Liszt. Strauss later recalled that the “basic principle of Liszt's symphonic works, that the poetic idea was the true formative element, became henceforth the guiding principle of my own work.”

Strauss' use of that principle proved spectacularly successful, and his most famous orchestral works — the tone poems Til Eulenspiegel, Death and Transfiguration, Don Juan and Ein Heldenleben — all spring from “poetic ideas” that lie outside the realm of music. So, too, does Don Quixote. But this latter work is formally quite unlike Strauss' other orchestral pieces. Indeed, it is unlike any other composition one might think of. In its rendering into music the outline and details of a literary subject, it is essentially a tone poem. At the same time, its considerable length, variety of themes and the industrious development of those themes point to a symphonic conception. Yet the music is cast not as a symphony, a genre with its own characteristic shape and developmental procedures, but as a set of variations on a group of several distinctive melodies. It features, however, a concerto-like part for cello, while the conspicuous solo roles for several of the orchestral instruments — notably viola, violin and bass clarinet — recall the concerto grosso or sinfonia concertante formats of the 18th century. In short,
Strauss created in *Don Quixote* an amalgam of genres in order to produce a new and original structure well suited to the unusual character of this work.

The initial portion of the composition presents several thematic “characters” that will assume major roles in the musical telling of Cervantes' tale. Don Quixote, filled with dreams of knightly glory, is heard in the opening measures. His theme, an ascending flourish followed by a slow descent, appears principally in the solo cello during the course of the composition. Dulcinea, the fair lady of Don Quixote's heart, is represented by a warmly romantic melody first played by the oboe. At length, we meet Sancho Panza, the Don's simple companion, in the bass clarinet and tuba.

Those themes are ingeniously transformed and combined in the variations that follow. These are not, however, the neatly structured paraphrases of classical theme-and-variation procedure. Instead, Strauss treats the variation format freely — so much so that the different “variations” might more profitably be considered a series of musical tableaux depicting various episodes of the story.

These are vividly suggested by the music. After the Introduction, Don Quixote sets out with Sancho Panza as a knight-errant. Inspired by thoughts of Dulcinea, he charges into battle against what he imagines to be fierce giants. (They are, in fact, windmills.) Next, the Don attacks a supposed army of sheep, whose bleating is sounded by the orchestral brass. An interlude follows during which the knight contemplates the ideals of chivalry while Sancho Panza voices more worldly concerns.

After a misadventure in which Don Quixote attacks a band of pilgrims (their chant is heard in the muted brass), our pitiable hero is inspired by a vision of Dulcinea. Sancho Panza dares to mock the lady, provoking the wrath of his master. The most graphic episode in the work then depicts the Don as he imagines himself flying through the air on a magic horse. An ill-fated boat ride leads to combat with a pair of monks (portrayed by two bassoons), whom the Don takes for magicians. Finally, Don Quixote is brought to his senses, and in the Finale gains a brief moment of lucidity before dying in peace.

**What to Listen For**

Strauss relates the tale of Don Quixote through emblematic themes and musical onomatopoeia. We meet Cervantes’ deluded hero in the opening section of the piece, where his courtly manner is represented by several short melodic ideas, and his desire to rescue a damsel by a theme for the oboe, which will become associated with Dulcinea. Strauss then suggests the Don’s dreams of knightly combat in a fantasy battle passage.
Martial music will play again later in the work. First, we meet Sancho Panza, whose theme-group conveys his rustic simplicity, his prattling and his tendency to earnestly pronounce proverbs. In the sections that follow, the misadventures of Don Quixote and Sancho bring graphic sounds that represent violent blows the Don suffers, a flock of sheep, the band of religious pilgrims, a boat ride and more. Don Quixote’s dream of Dulcinea brings rapturous music for the solo cello, and other passages feature not only this instrument but solo viola and other members of the orchestra.

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