

# Piano Fireworks

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Program Notes

by Tom Strini ©2017

"I first met pianist Conrad Tao in 2015 when he was featured as both pianist and composer with the Pittsburgh Symphony. Conrad thrilled the audience with his monstrous technical skills and I'm excited that we have a program that showcases that virtuosity—including a concerto that requires the pianist to only use one hand! The orchestra will be working equally hard on this program including Mozart's flashiest symphony, written to introduce himself to Parisian audiences.

The orchestra will also tackle Richard Strauss' character masterpiece, Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks. From the sneaky horn, to the giddy piccolo clarinet, to the grumbling bassoons, Strauss draws us into his drama like the greatest movie directors. I always think of the character of Till as a modern day stand-up comedian—making us laugh and smile, but always ready to shock and appall us when we let our guard down!"

— Francesco Lecce-Chong

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART (1756–1791)**  
**Symphony No. 31 ("Paris") in D Major,**  
**K. 297/200a [1779]**

*Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. First performed by the Eugene Symphony in October 2001 under the direction of Giancarlo Guerrero. Performance time is approximately 17 minutes.*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart hated Paris. At 22, he had traveled there with his mother to find a job. He got nowhere with that. He and his mother, Anna, were soon pressed for money and had to retreat to a shabby hotel, where she died on July 3, 1778.

At least he managed to compose and procure a performance, in June, of the Symphony No. 31, via the good offices of the ambassador from the Palatinate, a German principality. The piece was well received. The Concerts Spirituels, one of the first public, entrepreneurial concert series in Europe, picked it up and repeated it several times. For these programs, Mozart replaced the original second movement with a new one.

You have to wonder if he was commenting on the attention span of the French audience!

"Before the premiere, Mozart wrote to his father that 'I hope that even these idiots will find something in it to like,'" said Eugene Symphony Music Director Francesco Lecce-Chong.

Mozart clearly composed to impress Paris. He employed what was, at the time, a very large orchestra, with a full complement of winds, brasses and timpani. He loaded the score with fashionable "Mannheim rockets," rapid upward scales and arpeggios. He even yielded to the Concerts Spirituels' insistence on a *premier coup d'archet*, an opening unison blast.

"It's a showpiece, almost a concerto for orchestra," Lecce-Chong said. "He overdoes the Mannheim rockets almost to the point of the ridiculous—everyone gets to play them. This is music to entertain and to challenge the players. He didn't even bother including the standard minuet movement. It's just three movements, 20 minutes total, nothing repeated, nothing wasted. You have to wonder if he was commenting on the attention span of the French audience!"

**MAURICE RAVEL (1875–1937)**

**Piano Concerto for the Left Hand in D Major [1932]**

*In addition to the solo piano, this work is scored for three flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings. First performed by the Eugene Symphony in April 1982 under the direction of William McGlaughlin with Leon Fleisher as soloist. Performance time is approximately 19 minutes.*

In 1914, the Austrian army called up Paul Wittgenstein, a young, promising pianist born into one of the wealthiest European families, for service in World War I. A Russian bullet struck his right elbow. He was taken prisoner, and his arm was amputated.

Post-war, Wittgenstein (incidentally, the brother of Ludwig Wittgenstein, the influential philosopher) commissioned Paul Hindemith, Sergei Prokofiev, Erich Korngold, and Richard Strauss, among others, to compose for him to play with his remaining hand. He approached Maurice Ravel about a concerto, which Ravel delivered in 1931.

“Sometimes, in practice, I’ll play a passage with two hands, just to work out ideas,” said Conrad Tao, the soloist, in a phone interview. “It’s actually technically more challenging to play the concerto with two hands, which is a testament to how well it’s written.”

A good deal of contention and controversy surrounds this music. Alfred Cortot made an unauthorized two-hand version and performed it widely, despite the protests of Ravel and Wittgenstein. Ravel asked Arturo Toscanini to conduct the premiere, but the World’s Most Famous Conductor declined. Wittgenstein altered the piano part somewhat, which led to a permanent falling out with the composer.

All that strife has faded into history, but the music is very much alive and well. The concerto, about 20 minutes long in one continuous movement, opens with arpeggios on the open strings—E-A-D-G—of the basses. As the piano and the rest of the orchestra enter, the music slowly ascends from this deep, dark sonic cave.

“The great pleasure of this music is textural and harmonic,” Tao said. “The middle section is jaunty and has some Stravinskian humor, but the outer sections ebb and flow sonically, like an organism.”

**FRANZ LISZT (1811–1886)**

**Totentanz for Piano and Orchestra, S. 126 [1849]**

*In addition to the solo piano, this work is scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings. First performed by the Eugene Symphony in October 1999 under the direction of Miguel Harth-Bedoya with Dean Kramer as soloist. Performance time is approximately 16 minutes.*

The Romantics—and no one was more Romantic, in every capital- and lower-case sense of the word, than Franz Liszt—found fascination in all things medieval and macabre. According to Liszt scholar Alan Walker, the star pianist and composer descended into dungeons to spend time with condemned prisoners. In 1838, he visited the Campo Santo, in Pisa, home of *The Triumph of Death*, a huge 14th-century fresco. (He was in Italy after eloping with his mistress, the Countess d’Agoult, one of his many paramours. I told you he was a Romantic.)

In 1830, he attended the premiere of Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*. Berlioz and Liszt had much in common: Radical musical ideas, complicated love lives, and a fascination with the intersection of art, sex, death and religion. Sex, death and religion have a theme song: *Dies Irae*. That old Gregorian chant looms large in the *Symphonie fantastique*. In 1838, Liszt chose the tune as the theme for *Totentanz* and created a wild set of variations on it. He revised it several times over 21 years.

“The *Dies Irae* is solemn,” said Conrad Tao, the pianist. “Mortality and creation are deeply fundamental questions. But not much solemnity is in *Totentanz*. It has a lot of silliness and absurdity, and there’s a hint of blasphemy. An element of camp is in a lot of Liszt. I like that. I think Liszt only works if you appreciate that. Surface pleasure has a certain honesty; we shouldn’t shy away from it.”

The piece, like the source chant, is in D Dorian mode; the scale comprises the white keys of the piano from D to D. The half-steps fall between the second and third and the sixth and seventh degrees of the scale. So the sound differs from the major scale, with half-steps between three-four and seven-eight.

Such music-theory technicalities influence what we hear and feel. The raised seventh degree of

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the major scale—that half-step between seven and eight—gives Western harmony its forward drive and much of its expressive dissonance. Dorian mode, a construct associated with the older music theory that underpinned Gregorian chant, takes it away.

“The Dorian mode of the *Dies Irae* used by Liszt immediately brings to mind a Medieval sound,” Lecce-Chong said. “Although I would point out that Liszt does cheat—eventually, he brings in that leading tone (C-sharp), which takes away one of the coolest things about the opening of the piece.”

Some of the music sounds profound. Some of it sounds like the bone-clanking accompaniment to

...some of it is just fun and showing off. That was Liszt's conflict. He had this deeply religious side, but his other side just wanted to be Liberace.

skeletons dancing in an old animated cartoon.

“In its softest moments, it’s breathtakingly beautiful and sensitive,” Lecce-Chong said, referring especially to the fourth variation, a canon. “And then some of it is just fun and showing off. That was Liszt’s conflict. He had this deeply religious side, but his other side just wanted to be Liberace.”

### **RICHARD STRAUSS (1864–1949)**

#### **Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks, Op. 28 [1895]**

*Scored for three flutes, piccolo, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, and strings. First performed by the Eugene Symphony in October 1979 under the direction of Lawrence Maves, and last performed in April 1990 under the direction of Marin Alsop. Performance time is approximately 15 minutes.*

In this 15-minute tone poem, completed in 1895, Strauss illustrates the adventures of a medieval German folk figure, a prankster given to mocking just about everything and everyone.

“He’s a comedian who needles people,” Lecce-Chong said. “He finally goes too far and gets hanged.”

Technically, the charge is blasphemy—he dressed up as a clergyman and misbehaved. But even at the end of his rope, he manages to get out his needling, cackling themelet.

“When that piccolo clarinet comes in, you know it’s that cheeky rascal,” Lecce-Chong said. “It’s amazing how quickly Strauss paints these portraits.”

Till’s other, more developed theme is for horn, and every horn player takes up its challenge. Strauss works out these two themes in a Rondo form perfect for framing narrative vignettes. As Till rides his horse (basses) through the marketplace, chases girls (violins), mocks the clergy (violas) and academics (bassoons), and tries to cajole his stolid executioner (embodied by a funeral march), new themes represent the victims of his pranks and the ensuing chaos and outrage.

“The episodes are chatty and character-driven, like little operas,” Lecce-Chong said. “In some moments, Strauss makes you think that the music is about to turn beautiful, that it will settle into something. And then a horse stampedes through.”

Till Eulenspiegel is fun and funny to hear, but no joke to play. It’s downright nasty.

“By all standards, Strauss would have earned an F in orchestration class,” Lecce-Chong said. “It’s as if Strauss took on the Till persona and played a prank on the orchestra.”

But when an orchestra nails it, the effect is dazzling. “That’s what this whole program is about,” he said. “Dazzling and amazing the audience.” 🎻