

The Proms Listening Service

Radio 3's Tom Service proposes onward sonic explorations inspired by the music of tonight's Prom



R. STRAUSS

Don Juan

Who is Strauss's Don Juan? Strauss is no musical moralist, glorying in the Don's comeuppance or licking his lips at the prospect of his demise. Instead, Strauss relishes the amoral progress of his anti-hero with a sympathetic twinkle in his eye. Perhaps. But that's the point about all of the heroes in Strauss's instrumental music: they are never the one-dimensional caricatures that they might seem to be from the grandiloquence of their orchestration or the apparent egomania of their titles. Because the hero whose exploits are sent up, parodied, criticised and satirised more often than any other in his music is Strauss himself. *Ein Heldenleben* – 'A Hero's Life' – isn't the seamless progress of a composer-hero to his victory over the world but a person whose hubris is laid low by his critics, who reaches a transcendence with his companion but must do battle again before his ending is sounded by music that is as resigned as it is resolved. Strauss is his own anti-hero! That's even more true of his *Sinfonia domestica*, in which what looks like a massive exercise in self- and family-aggrandising compositional virtuosity is anything but, as Strauss lays his domestic life bare, exposing its trials and tribulations as well as its joys for all of us to hear. What goes for his depictions of himself and his family is also the case in his portrait of Don Quixote, the über-anti-hero of Cervantes's novel and Strauss's tone-poem for solo cello and orchestra – and sheep, windmills and donkeys! And in the *Alpine Symphony* the arrogance of human beings is conquered by that work's true heroes, the might of the mountain and the atheistic forces of nature.

R. STRAUSS

Death and Transfiguration

Strauss's music dares to go through the veil to the other world; and, in so doing, it features a tune that **John Williams** thought was so good he stole it as the love theme for his music for *Superman*. Which is, of course, the most Nietzschean of all DC Comics' creations, a literal embodiment of Nietzsche's *Übermensch*, the 'Superman'. Kinda. **Laurie Anderson's** 'O Superman' from 1981 (three years after the film) is an anti-Nietzschean exposure of the limits of the American dream and one of the greatest, most haunting post-minimalist reveries of the 1980s – and it was also No. 2 in the UK charts. Those were the days!

BEETHOVEN

Symphony No. 7

Each and every movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony is driven by an all-consuming rhythmic obsession, a mania for a different species of rhythm. A century and more before **Stravinsky's** *The Rite of Spring* or the minimalist rhythm-symphonies of **Philip Glass's** *Music in 12 Parts* or **Steve Reich's** *Music for 18 Musicians*, Beethoven got there first. He also introduced another novelty right at the end of the symphony, when the lower strings are left behind, churning away on a dissonant semitone while the rest of the orchestra have resolved the tonal trajectory of the piece. It's a grammatical mis-step but a dramatic *coup de théâtre* that pre-dates the harmonic innovations of Berlioz, Mahler or Wagner by decades, and it's some of the most thrillingly unsettling music ever composed. Or your money back!