

Franz von Suppé (1819-1895)

Pique Dame Overture

Franz von Suppé, a native of Spalato in Dalmatia (now known as Split, Croatia) was born on April 18, 1819. He first studied law and then medicine before devoting his life to music. In 1835, he took up residence in Vienna, where he would prosper for the rest of his long life. He received his first appointment as a theater conductor at the Josephstadt Theatre in 1840 before moving on to the more prestigious Theatre an der Wien in 1845. As a composer, he made his debut while at the Josephstadt with incidental music written to accompany one of the productions. An admirer of the French composer Jacques Offenbach, Suppé sought to adapt many of the goals and techniques of the French opera-bouffe to the Viennese stage. The result, he created his own idiom, the *operetta*. His first true success was with *Poet and Peasant*, which premiered in 1846. As a skillful and tasteful composer, with an inspired gift for melody, harmony and orchestration, Suppé has left a legacy of many fine works. At the time of his retirement, he was easily acknowledged as the leading composer of light opera in Vienna. Although today he is mostly remembered for his overtures, they only give us a quick glimpse into the wit, originality of ideas and verve that were the essence of this most original composer.

Pique Dame is the title that Suppé gave to a revised version of an earlier work that he expanded into two acts and is very loosely based on the story “The Queen of Spades” by the Russian Alexander Pushkin. Tchaikovsky also used the story as the basis for the libretto for his opera of the same name. The operetta premiered in June of 1864 to moderate success. It is rarely performed today. However, the Overture has been a mainstay in the concert repertoire for many years. The Overture is cast in four sections beginning with a majestic slow introduction. This is followed by a quick and boisterous *Allegro con fuoco*. A more relaxed *Andantino con moto* follows featuring a duet in the flutes. The closing section is Suppé at his best with a rousing coda bringing the work to a close.

--Stephen Larmore