NEW JERSEY SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
NJSO
XIAN ZHANG MUSIC DIRECTOR

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

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Winter Festival: Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*

ONE-MINUTE NOTES

Smetana: "The Moldau" from *Má vlast*

Smetana's most famous composition follows the course of a great river, from two springs at its source to the splendor of its convergence with the River Elbe in the north. The music evokes landscape and Bohemian culture with majestic themes.

Clara Schumann: Piano Concerto

Clara Schumann wrote this romantic piano concerto as a teenager, years before she married Robert. The three movements are played without pause, and they reflect the influence of Mendelssohn, Weber and Chopin. Her concerto is a fascinating window into the evolving romantic style.

Prokofiev: Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*

No ballet composer brought characters to life through music better than Prokofiev. Fierce, grinding drama illustrates animosity between the feuding Verona families. The purity and genuineness of the doomed lovers' passion comes through in their duets. Prokofiev never forgot that this music was meant to be danced. Rhythm and flexibility are everywhere.

SMETANA: "The Moldau" from *Má vlast*

BEDŘICH SMETANA

Born: March 2, 1824, in Litomyšl, Czechoslovakia

Died: May 12, 1884, in Prague, Czechoslovakia

Composed: November 20–December 8, 1874

World Premiere: April 4, 1875, in Prague. The full cycle *Má vlast* was premiered on November 5, 1882, in Prague's Zofin Palace.

NJSO Premiere: 1938–39 season. Rene Pollain conducted.

Duration: 12 minutes

During the second half of the 19th century, the countries we now know as Slovakia and the Czech Republic were part of the Austro-Hungarian empire, ruled by Hapsburg monarchs. Nationalism in music was largely a reaction to German and Austrian dominance of musical forms. Across Europe, many nations were discovering in their native folk music and dance rhythms the materials for an individual musical style that could also serve as a powerful reminder of national identity. A staunch patriot, Smetana found in composing the outlet for his deep love of his native Bohemia. Most of his compositions were inspired by an event in his life or an extra-musical association with his homeland.

Smetana's greatest work is *Má vlast*, a series of six orchestral tone poems composed over a period of several years in the 1870s and dedicated to the city of Prague. It is the quintessential nationalist work, celebrating the rich Bohemian heritage and land of which Smetana was so proud. Heard in its entirety, *Má vlast* is a unified cycle both musically and spiritually. It encompasses Czech legend, landscape, geography and history, evoking both people and places. Best known by far is the second movement, "Vltava" ("The Moldau"), a favorite of most symphony-goers and performed more frequently than any of the other movements.

Vltava is the river originating in southern Bohemia, converging with the River Elbe in the north. "The Moldau" consists of a series of episodes freely following the river's course from its origins until the point where it joins the Elbe. Smetana begins with the two springs (represented by the orchestra's first and second flutes)—one warm water, the other cold—that feed it, joining to run through rustic countryside. The flutes' sinuous, liquid lines constitute one of the most ingenious evocations of nature in all music.

They are joined by the clarinets, and eventually by strings, as the forest streams join forces to become a mighty river, whose full majesty is declaimed by a famous E-minor melody. Notes in the score indicate the Moldau's path as it meanders. Smetana next takes us past a scene of hunting in the forest, a rustic village wedding (signaled by a change to duple meter and a peasant dance), moonlight and the dance of water sprites, rapids and a final salute as the river passes by Vyšehrad, the massive rock that overlooks Prague (which is also the subject of *Má vlast*'s first segment).

The musical form has some of the rhetorical inevitability of the river itself; on a more technical basis, Smetana

provides unity by re-introducing the “Moldau” theme in the final sections, this time in rich E major that celebrates the river’s power.

Instrumentation: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, harp and strings.

CLARA SCHUMANN: Piano Concerto in A Minor, Op. 7

CLARA SCHUMANN (*née* Wieck)
Born: September 13, 1819, in Leipzig, Germany
Died: May 20, 1896, in Frankfurt, Germany
Composed: 1833–36
World Premiere: November 9, 1834, in Leipzig. Mendelssohn conducted the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. Clara Wieck was the soloist.
NJSO Premiere: These are the NJSO premiere performances.
Duration: 21 minutes

So you thought Robert Schumann was the composer in the family! His wife, the eminent pianist Clara Wieck Schumann, was encouraged by her ambitious father to compose, while he was directing her career as a young instrumental prodigy. Starting in 1830, Friedrich Wieck found composition teachers in Leipzig for her. Clara retained a strong interest in composition and new music her entire life.

Her concerto is remarkable on several levels. One is that she had completed her first draft in 1833, when she was all of 14. Another is that it is Clara Schumann’s only surviving work with orchestra. Most important is the quality of the music. Her Piano Concerto is being widely performed this season because 2019–20 marks her bicentennial. The concerto *should* be played because it is a fine piece of music and a splendid example of early romanticism.

Her original concept was a Concertstück—a concert piece for piano and orchestra in one movement. The finale, which is nearly as long as the first two movements combined, was composed first; she decided later to append the first two movements. We know from her diaries and Robert Schumann’s letters that he assisted her with orchestration for the finale. She appears to have scored the first two movements herself.

The concerto is in three distinct movements; however, they are played *attacca* (without pause). The structure is fantasia-like, with only distant links to classical sonata form. The piano's first entrance occurs in bold double octaves only 17 measures in, interrupting the orchestral exposition with great authority. Her organization is sectional, with rhapsodic piano writing that borders on improvisatory. Elaborate decoration in the right hand is often supported by a nocturne-like accompaniment in the left hand, suggesting the influence of Chopin. The orchestra's role is largely subservient after the introduction.

The orchestra's role is even smaller in the lovely Romanze, which consists of solo piano for half its duration, then a duet for cello and piano. A timpani roll at the end effects the transition to the finale. Attentive listeners will hear pre-echoes of Liszt's piano conceros, and Liszt was indeed influenced by Clara Schumann's concerto.

The finale is a brisk polonaise. The use of dance rhythms is one of several characteristics of early Romantic piano music that Schumann adopted in her concerto. Others are freedom with phrase structure, bravura technique in solo passages—the influence of the violin superstar Paganini—and Italianate opera figuration in lyrical sections. There is no formal cadenza, but the keyboard fireworks are front and center in this exciting finale, which also shows a more integrated partnership between soloist and orchestra.

Instrumentation: woodwinds, horns and trumpets in pairs; trombone; timpani; strings and solo piano.

PROKOFIEV: Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*

SERGEI PROKOFIEV
Born: April 23, 1891, in Sontzovka, Ukraine
Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow, USSR
Composed: Autumn 1935
World Premiere: December 30, 1938, in Brno, Czechoslovakia.
NJSO Premiere: 1987–88 season. Hugh Wolff conducted.
Duration: 40 minutes

Since Shakespeare's time, his plays have inspired artists: poets, painters and especially musicians. Long before the film industry appropriated Shakespeare as its darling, *Hamlet, MacBeth*, *King Lear, A Midsummer Night's*

Dream and *The Tempest* spawned art works in other fields. Probably none of the plays has had a greater impact in music than Shakespeare's first great tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*. The tale of star-crossed lovers in Verona was a source of inspiration to many composers during the 19th century. Hector Berlioz wrote a dramatic symphony based on the drama; Vincenzo Bellini and Charles Gounod composed *Romeo and Juliet* operas; Pyotr Ilich Tchaikovsky wrote a symphonic poem that he labeled "fantasy-overture."

The theatrical magnetism of the story continued to be irresistible in the 20th century. One brilliant musical imagination after another was captivated by the emotional sweep of the doomed young lovers, and the passion of the feud between their two families. The most famous modern adaptation was surely Leonard Bernstein's 1957 musical *West Side Story*, which transferred the feud to New York City and metamorphosed its principal characters into Puerto Rican immigrants.

More than 20 years before Bernstein, the Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev turned his attention to *Romeo and Juliet* in the mid-1930s. He chose ballet, a realm in which Shakespeare's play had not yet found a home. There was good reason for such an apparent gap in the repertoire. Shakespeare's drama, so suffused with innuendo and dramatic detail, would be a monumental challenge to convey through ballet. The dancers would not be able to rely exclusively on technique; they would have be able to act in order to project the emotional and psychological nuances of Shakespeare's story. Prokofiev developed the ballet scenario with Sergei Radlov (1892–1958), a Soviet stage director with considerable Shakespearean experience. Even so, they faced a long battle bringing the project to the stage.

Though no novice to ballet scores—he had collaborated with the legendary impresario Sergei Diaghilev and the choreographers Léonide Massine and George Balanchine in the 1920s—Prokofiev's previous experience was with one-act ballets. This new subject required great detail in the scenario and, by association, greater length in the music. At almost two and one-half hours, the ballet remains one of the longest in the entire repertoire.

Prokofiev composed most of his *Romeo and Juliet* in 1935, only two years after he returned to the Soviet Union. After his score was complete and ready for production, *Romeo and Juliet* started to encounter political and artistic snags that resulted in its postponement. Frustrated, Prokofiev extracted two sets of seven numbers each from his score of 52 numbers and published them separately as orchestral suites. Eventually, he extracted a third suite as well.

As suites, the excerpts from the ballet became well known in Russian concert halls several years before the ballet was finally produced at Leningrad's Kirov Ballet in 1940. The work has since earned the status of a classic, and it has become Prokofiev's most beloved ballet score.

An important characteristic of the suites is that their movements bear no direct chronological relationship to events in the ballet. Prokofiev rearranged their sequence for musical (as opposed to dramatic) logic, contrast and coherence. Many conductors have elected to mix movements from more than one of the suites, rather than adopting the composer's selection. In keeping with that flexible tradition, Xian Zhang has chosen excerpts that show Prokofiev's versatility and skill as character portrayer, also highlighting his gift to suggest both tenderness and high drama through music.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

In the first number, Prokofiev communicates the menacing antipathy between the Montagues and Capulets with great artistry. "Young Juliet" portrays the innocent heroine before she has met Romeo. Still half girl, half woman, she is untroubled and teasing. Responsibility, passion and tragedy have not yet clouded her life.

Prokofiev included several dances in the score as music for transitional scenes. These movements generally featured the *corps de ballet* or minor characters, and they helped to move the narrative forward between cameo movements for the principals. This "Minuet" is broad, public and ceremonial, suggesting the elegance of the Capulets' ballroom.

"Masks" is the music for Romeo, Mercutio and Benvolio arriving at the Capulets' ball, uninvited and in disguise. Percussion is essential to establishing a martial mood for this movement. Yes, the young men are at a social event and intend to be on their best behavior, but the uncompromising march rhythm makes clear they could be looking for trouble.

The "Balcony Scene" contains some of Prokofiev's most romantic music, evoking the first magical moments that the young lovers share together alone. Echoes of earlier movements recur briefly, reminding us of the pair's individual family histories, but the sweeping themes and passionate swirls of sound are all about this first declaration of love.

In the ballet's last act, Romeo purchases poison in Mantua when he learns of Juliet's death. He returns to Verona, where he slips into the Capulet crypt. In "Romeo at Juliet's Grave," Prokofiev combines funeral march, anguish, and overwhelming grief. The young man mourns his beloved, unaware that she will soon awaken from her drugged sleep. Knowing that he cannot live without Juliet, he drinks the vial of poison. She regains consciousness, only to discover Romeo dead at her side, the flacon empty. Seizing his dagger, she plunges it into her breast. The star-crossed lovers are united in death.

The "Death of Tybalt" captures the frenetic atmosphere of the melee as Romeo resolves to avenge Mercutio's death through a duel with Tybalt, nephew of Juliet's mother. Tybalt's death at Romeo's hand, which concludes the ballet's second act, prompts a scene of somber mourning as the Capulets gather around the body of their fallen kinsman. The die is cast, and Romeo is banished from Verona.

Prokofiev once said that he "had taken special pains to achieve a simplicity which will, I hope, reach the hearts of all listeners. If people find no melody and no emotion in this work of mine I shall feel very sorry; but I feel sure that they will sooner or later." With their sweep and brilliant orchestral color, these selections stand proudly in the finest romantic tradition and remind us of the timeless tragedy in Shakespeare's drama.

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, cornet, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, glockenspiel, tambourine, xylophone, triangle, celeste, piano and strings.