

Romeo & Juliet

William Shakespeare is arguably the most influential author in Western musical history. Hundreds of compositions have their roots in Shakespeare's comedies, tragedies, and histories, including songs, tone poems, incidental music, symphonies, film scores, and most important, operas. None of his works have inspired more music than *Romeo and Juliet*. Consider, for example, the operas based on the play. In addition to Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* and Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, there are lesser-known operas on the topic by Daniel Steibelt, Nicola Vacai, Riccardo Zandonai, and Niccolò Zingarelli—not to mention Bernstein's *West Side Story*. This weekend's program explores two different musical approaches to the tale of the star-crossed lovers, contrasting full-blooded romanticism in the Tchaikovsky with a glorious 20th-century ballet score in the Prokofiev. The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, acting scenes from the play, brings added dimensions to this timeless tragedy.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born: May 7, 1840 in Votkinsk, Viatka District, Russia

Died: November 6, 1893 in St. Petersburg, Russia

Composed: in 1869–70, revised 1880

World Premiere: May 1, 1886, in Tbilisi, Georgia

Duration: 19 minutes

Instrumentation: two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, harp, and strings

Unlikely Friendship

In the late 1860s, Mily Balakirev (1837-1910) was a powerful figure in Russian music. His influence extended beyond the circle of disciples known as the 'Mighty Handful.' Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky fell under Balakirev's influence in 1867. By 1869, the two men were spending a considerable amount of time together and exchanged a lively correspondence.

Their was an unlikely friendship. Balakirev was a difficult and troubled man, inherently suspicious of anyone having formal Conservatory training in music. He represented the musical anti-establishment. Tchaikovsky had been schooled in western music and favored traditional forms. Inevitably the more experienced Balakirev imprinted his musical ideas and forceful personality on Tchaikovsky. At Balakirev's suggestion, Tchaikovsky

began work in October 1869 on an overture based on Shakespeare's tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*, completing the first version by late November.

Balakirev accepted the dedication, writing to Tchaikovsky with praise for the love theme and declaring that the overture was his best work to date. Following the first performance in Moscow in March 1870, Tchaikovsky withdrew *Romeo and Juliet* and revised it substantially. It was published in May 1871 by the Berlin firm Bote & Bock. Nearly 10 years later, Tchaikovsky returned to *Romeo and Juliet*, this time altering the coda. That third version is the one we hear at these performances.

A Unique Musical Form

Tchaikovsky called this work "fantasy-overture." The title is significant and distinguishes *Romeo and Juliet* from the Lisztian tone poems that were so prevalent at the time. His approach to Shakespeare's play is conceptual, rather than a musical attempt to depict the play scene by scene.

Love, death, and fate all figure prominently in *Romeo and Juliet*. Each manifests itself in Tchaikovsky's music and is clearly developed, in various guises, within the framework of sonata form. He treats his themes in the broadest possible fashion; for example, the sword theme is not limited to the fighting among Mercutio, Romeo, and Tybalt, but also symbolizes the enmity between the two feuding families, and the lovers' futile plight. Tchaikovsky's orchestration is economical and brilliant—undoubtedly the positive influence of Balakirev, who had criticized his lack of restraint in scoring earlier works—with cymbal crashes employed to great effect in rhythmically exciting passages.

The Love Theme

Tchaikovsky's greatest achievement in *Romeo and Juliet* is the love theme. The most memorable melody in the work—it actually consists of two segments, one for Romeo and one for Juliet—beautifully intertwined and full of longing. In the 1880 version, Tchaikovsky reworked the coda to re-emphasize the love music through recapitulation and further development. By means of the triumphant ending, he provided the lovers (and, by extension, us) with spiritual catharsis and redemption, making eminently clear where lay his personal sympathies. United together eternally in death, Romeo and Juliet decidedly have the advantage over those left behind to contend with the vagaries of fate.

Sergei Prokofiev: Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*

Sergei Prokofiev

Born: April 23, 1891 in Sontzovka, Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953 in Moscow, Russia

Composed: Autumn 1935–1936

World Premiere: December 30, 1938 in Brno, Czechoslovakia

Duration: 1 hour and 4 minutes

Instrumentation: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, two bassoons, contrabassoon, cornet, three trumpets, six horns, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle,

wooden drum, maracas, tambourine, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tubular bells, xylophone, glockenspiel, celesta, two harps, piano, organ, viola d'amore, and strings

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* and *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, and Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky wrote the *Fantasy Overture* that opened this concert.

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.

A Shakespeare Ballet

More than twenty 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 need 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 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 a character portrayer, rather than adhering to a sequence that corresponds precisely to the events of the tragedy. This weekend, the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey enhances the *Romeo and Juliet* experience with excerpts from Shakespeare's tragedy.

ABOUT THE MUSIC

In the first number, Prokofiev communicates the menacing antipathy between the Montagues and Capulets with great artistry. 'Madrigal' is the moment the lovers meet at the ball: their first dance, which ignites a romantic spark that is inconsistent with—and oblivious of—their families' feud. A tender Andante, it is scored lightly to emphasize the intimacy of the moment. By contrast, '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 '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.

In the ballet's last act, Romeo purchases poison in Mantua when he learns of Juliet's death. He returns in secret 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.

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.

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