

## ***Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy—Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky***

Even a cursory review of the lives of most of the significant composers of the nineteenth century—from Berlioz to Verdi—shows them to have been fascinated with the timeless art of Shakespeare. In fact, it is a major trait of Romanticism as an intellectual movement to have plumbed the depths of his work for archetypes of the human condition. And it is telling that generations of young composers took personal initiative to school themselves so. Tchaikovsky is representative, and his concert overture, *Romeo and Juliet*, is typical of the many compositions of the times that drew inspiration from the playwright.

Composed just as Tchaikovsky turned twenty-nine years old, it's a relatively early work. The composer had composed his first programmatic work, *Fatum* (fate)—he soon tore up the original score—only the year before, and the first version of his first symphony three years previous. So, almost all of the orchestral music that has established his durable popularity was yet to come. In fact, his beloved fifth and sixth symphonies, as well as *The Nutcracker*, lay roughly two decades in the future. But, withal, this work has taken its place with the masterpieces of his maturity. That being said, *Romeo and Juliet* did not take that place without a somewhat checkered history.

Three versions of it evolved, as the composer labored to create the successful, final iteration. The première (1870) of his first take was not successful at all, owing to numerous technical and conceptual problems, and Tchaikovsky made extensive changes, most of which are in the final version. Finally, about ten years later, the composer made a few more changes, and that is the version we all hear, today. All throughout the initial composition of *Romeo and Juliet* Tchaikovsky was guided in great detail by Mily Balakirev, the informal leader of the famed group of Russian nationalistic composers known as the “mighty handful,” the others being Cui, Borodin, Mussorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov. Located in St. Petersburg, they were self-taught followers of Glinka, and sought to establish a Russian school of musical style. Balakirev and Tchaikovsky (by then, living in Moscow) had established an informal relationship earlier, and *Romeo and Juliet* was the result of a kind of collaboration between the two men. Balakirev had suggested the subject matter, and even the rough sonata form, which associated the introduction with Friar Laurence, the first theme with the conflict between the Capulets and the Montagues, and the second theme with the lovers. Balakirev made significant suggestions for revisions to the composition, and evidently Tchaikovsky took several of them to heart—even dedicating the work to him. On the other hand, most scholars seem to agree that the result is still totally Tchaikovsky's composition, and that Balakirev cannot legitimately be considered the younger man's mentor.

The “Friar Laurence” introduction is a solemn evocation of the church through skillful writing for low woodwinds that masterfully imitates a small reed organ. Little by little Tchaikovsky draws the ominous mood out, teasing us with intimations of the conflict to come, in the manner with which so much of the drama in his later ballets is spun out. Eventually, the main theme explodes as the Capulets and the Montagues battle, and, after a bit of teasing, the familiar “love theme” is heard, colored poignantly by the English horn. Now, that all three protagonists have been introduced, Tchaikovsky builds the conflict with a vengeful return to the battle, replete with palpable swordplay from the percussion section. You'll find the same

pictorial talent displayed years later in the attack of the mice in *The Nutcracker*. But, love triumphs—if only for a bit—and the theme of the lovers soars out in the quintessential orchestration so familiar from a thousand cultural uses: lush strings and “heart-throbbing” horns. Conflict resumes, this time with sinister bits of Friar Laurence’s theme, and finally the death of the star-crossed lovers is clear. The timpani taps out a dirge as an epilogue, with an intimation of the pair’s transfiguration in the rest of the orchestra. Dramatic orchestral hammer-strokes seal their fate and conclude the tragedy.

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