

Concert 4

March 9, 2019

Excerpts from *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, *Fatom* (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.

***Borrow Cupid’s Wings*--Jordan Roper**

Jordan Roper—whose parents live in Cheyenne—is a young film composer at the beginning of his career, after having been graduated from Brigham Young University-Idaho and the Pacific Northwest Film Scoring Program in recent years.

In Act I, Scene 4 of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo and his gang of friends are set to crash the celebration being held by the Capulet family. Romeo is not at all confident that they will be able to enter so boldly, and resists the admonition of his friend, Mercutio, that he must dance. He complains the he has “a soul of lead” that stakes him to the ground, so that he cannot move. He is still depressed over the lost affair with Rosaline. Mercutio’s response is that as an ardent lover, Romeo must “Borrow Cupid’s wings, and soar with them above a common bound.” That is, meet someone else. Mercutio has a rather jaded view of love, while Romeo is clearly an idealist. Romeo responds with an utter lack of confidence—making an important point about his character, and his spiritual ardor. The metaphor, “Borrow Cupid’s Wings” can easily apply to much of this tragedy.

Selections from *Roméo et Juliette*—Charles Gounod

Charles Gounod, outside of France, is known today chiefly for only two works, *Faust*, and the air, “Ave Maria,” that he superimposed over Bach’s C major prelude from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. That is sad, of course, and a distortion of the composer’s enormous reputation, talent, and his vast number of compositions. Along with Fauré, Saint-Saëns, and Debussy, he was at the top of musical art in the second half of nineteenth-century France. An immensely religious man, he wrote many sacred vocal works, solo piano works, and twelve operas, as well as much more. But, fame can be cruel and transitory.

Gounod achieved what is certainly his greatest success with his opera, *Faust* (1859), one of the most frequently performed operas of all time. Its great popularity led the director of the Théâtre Lyrique, Léon Carvalho, to commission what he hoped would be an equally successful work, *Roméo et Juliette*. Premiered at the Théâtre Lyrique in 1867, the latter opera, while successful, never achieved the popularity of *Faust*. *Roméo et Juliette*, despite its lovely music, and the focus on the two principals, in its pared down libretto, simply did not have the appeal and impact of the earlier work. From the beginning, critics have observed that the opera is basically carried by the charming, lyrical duets of the pair of lovers, as well as the immortal, effervescent waltz song, “Je veux vivre,” of Juliette from Act I. Nonetheless, these musical moments have an immense attraction, and are elegant testimony to the composer’s greatness. The opera understandably has survived on that musical strength, alone.

“One Hand, One Heart” from *West Side Story*—Leonard Bernstein

Earlier this season we examined the amazing career of Bernstein; his position as one of the great conductors of the twentieth century, his facility as teacher, skill as a pianist, charm as a television personality, and, of course as a wonderful composer, left behind a legacy equaled by few. And while he worked assiduously as a composer of “serious” music, there is no doubt that

his greatest compositions were in American popular theatre. His natural talent there was prodigious, and he began early. At twenty-six, his *On the Town* opened on Broadway. *Wonderful Town*, *Peter Pan*, *Facsimile*, *Candide*, and, of course, *West Side Story*, followed in succession.

Opening on Broadway in 1957, and set in New York City on the Upper West Side, the story replaces Shakespeare's Montagues and Capulets with the gangs, Jets and Sharks. Tony, a former member of the Jets, has fallen in love with Maria, the sister of the Puerto Rican Sharks. This impossible and tragic situation develops against the backdrop of an impending rumble between the rival gangs, and the "star-crossed" lovers are caught in the crossfire. Maria works in a bridal shop, and when Tony comes to tell her that he will try to stop the fight, they dream of their wedding with "One Hand, One Heart."

In the original Broadway production the rôle of Maria was sung by Carol Lawrence, and that of Tony, by Larry Kert. In the stunningly successful film version of 1961, the part of Maria (Natalie Wood) was dubbed in by the immortal Marni Nixon, and that of Tony by Jimmy Bryant. Nixon, of course, was one of America's greatest singers, dubbing tracks for the lead actresses anonymously in almost every film musical that one can think of—including *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady*, *The Sound of Music* and others. She could sing anything and did, from opera, the music of Arnold Schoenberg, to "ghost singing" in the films, *Mary Poppins*, *An Affair to Remember*, and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. So when you hear this lovely duet, think not of Natalie, but of Marni—the greatest singer most have not heard of.

Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*—Sergei Prokofiev

Prokofiev and Dmitri Shostakovich are the two composers who stood above the rest of those who labored during the years of the Soviet Union. Unlike, Shostakovich, however, Prokofiev enjoyed part of his career living and composing in the West, returning to the USSR in 1936 voluntarily. Like his compatriot, he must be counted as one of the great composers of the twentieth century, although unlike Shostakovich, his direct influence on composers outside of the Soviet sphere was minimal. He was a virtuoso pianist, and one who also composed from the outset, graduating from the St. Petersburg Conservatory shortly before World War I. His musical style was based in the Russian romantic tradition, but he established early on a personal idiom that was characterized by pungent dissonances, soaring lyrical melodies, a facile manipulation of motoric rhythms, and kaleidoscopic harmonic changes. Part and parcel of his musical personality was an acerbic appreciation of satire, parody, and even the grotesque.

With the advent of the Revolution he left Russia, and spent most of the next two decades in America and Europe, moving frequently, trying to establish himself in a number of countries—including the USA during a portion of the war. During this time he adapted his style somewhat to accommodate his audiences. All the while he returned to the Soviet Union from time to time for extensive concertizing. His works were performed frequently there, and he always kept his Soviet passport. He was never a political naïf regarding the life of artists under that political system, and it must be surmised that his eventual removal to the USSR was made with open eyes. His musical language had been gradually moving to a simpler, more accessible style—a necessary condition for artists who wished to serve a collectivist state and appeal to the masses. So, when he and his family arrived in Russia in 1936, he adapted readily to the political requirements by composing works that addressed the necessary content of "socialist realism." This primarily meant patriotic subjects, in a traditional musical style, that served political ends. Nevertheless, his ballet, "Romeo and Juliet," ran into difficulties, and has led a somewhat

checkered life since its composition, notwithstanding its position as probably the twentieth century's most popular ballet.

The ballet originated in 1935 as a collaboration between the composer and the forward thinking Soviet dramatists, Sergei Radlov and Adrian Piotrovsky. They were in agreement that the ballet should not be conceived as tragedy, but rather, as an affirmative statement of courage on the part of youth to contest old ways and traditions. Well, suffice it say, courage was understandably in short supply in Soviet Russia during the mid-thirties—the time of the infamous Stalinist purges. Millions of totally innocent and complaisant Russians died, not to speak of those who had “courage.” The Soviet artistic censors were in high gear, publicly condemning all who ran afoul of the Byzantine ideological complexity of the party line in art. Moreover, the Bolshoi Ballet rejected the original version as “un-danceable,” leading to an association with the Kirov Ballet, but that didn't work out, either, at first. The official Soviet newspaper, *Pravda*, in the meantime had published its infamous editorials condemning a whole raft of the country's leading artists (including Shostakovich), and that led to all sorts of retrenchments in progressive styles throughout the artistic community. Accordingly, even before Prokofiev's ballet was first performed, it underwent radical and disfiguring “surgery,” changing much of the original artistic intent.

The work finally enjoyed its première in the Czechoslovakian town of Brno (capital of Moravia) in December of 1938. It must have been a rather tense affair, for Hitler had moved into the Sudetenland—which included parts of Moravia—only two months previous, with consequences for the local communists. Subsequently, even more changes were made in the ballet for the Russian première in Leningrad in January of 1940. By that time, Prokofiev's ballet had obviously undergone noteworthy alteration from its original genesis, but that is the version that ultimately went on to international acclaim. It was rather late in coming to this country, enjoying the first staged performance only in 1969. But American audiences have long enjoyed concert performances of Prokofiev's score (1940 version). Apparently, the composer hit just the right mixture of Russian romanticism and pungent 1930s modernism to please American audiences everywhere. Prokofiev later extracted three concert suites from the score, each featuring six or seven selected movements from the complete ballet.

--Wm. E. Runyan