

Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra
Program Notes for Concert March 7, 2015

by Geoffrey Decker

Overture to "Romeo and Juliet"

by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky
(1840–1893)

Like Giuseppe Verdi and myriad other composers of music's Romantic Era, Tchaikovsky was smitten with Shakespeare. In fact, he wrote no fewer than three works of Shakespearean titles and subjects. Included are his 1873 symphonic poem *The Tempest*, Op. 18, his 1888 fantasy overture and incidental music for *Hamlet*, Op. 67a and b, respectively, and this evening's work – the most-beloved and most-performed of the three – the fantasy overture to *Romeo and Juliet* (the work has no opus number).

After the failed St. Petersburg premier of his symphonic poem entitled *Fatum* (destroyed shortly thereafter by the composer), the work's most vocal critic, the composer Mily Balakirev, encouraged the young professor of the Moscow Conservatory to write a piece based on *Romeo and Juliet*. Balakirev even went so far as to put up his own *King Lear* Overture as a model and, knowing that Tchaikovsky had trouble writing unstructured works, even suggested the form and key progression to him. Although he called it a "fantasy overture," the *Romeo and Juliet* is in classic sonata form with an introduction and an epilogue.

The introduction represents Friar Laurence. Notice how quiet and chorale-like the music is here. One might think of a chapel and the friar's saintly goodness perhaps tinged with naiveté. But underneath this quiet are foreboding goings-on in the lower strings. We know something is up. Something that's not right and comforting like we should probably feel while in church.

The introduction builds and gives way to music depicting the conflict between the two Veronese families, the Capulets and the Montagues. In fact, Tchaikovsky portrays the sword fight and death of Mercutio quite vividly. As the music slows, we hear the first notes of the famed love theme representing Romeo's meeting Juliet, leading into the balcony scene. The passion and yearning of this beautiful theme, used in so many commercials,

TV shows, cartoons and movies is almost unbearable. Adding to the excitement is the agitation and foreboding underneath the theme.

Two giant cymbal crashes represent the double suicide of the lovers and, shortly thereafter, we hear the work's epilogue in the form of a dirge representing the funeral of the two. The woodwinds play a beautiful homage to the couple. Ending the work is another reference to the love theme followed by a giant crescendo and punctuated notes in the entire orchestra, capped by a held major chord made even more stark by absent percussion.

Actually performed in major European cities in two different prior forms of completion, Tchaikovsky finally finished the final version of the *Romeo and Juliet* fantasy overture – the one we know today – on September 10, 1880. It received its premier almost six years later on May 1, 1886, when composer-conductor Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov conducted it in Tbilisi.

Cello Concerto No. 1 in E-flat Major, Op. 107

by Dmitri Shostakovich
(1906–1975)

Following in the footsteps of his Russian predecessors, composer Dmitri Shostakovich developed his own style of mixing traditional music with his own brand of twentieth-century modernity. Although he most often fit his music with lush romantic harmony, he certainly swung out into far left field when he felt the urge. Tonight's work, his *Cello Concerto No. 1*, is one of the works fitting pretty squarely between the old and the new. It shares characteristics with Sergei Prokofiev's *Sinfonia Concertante* for cello and orchestra, which Shostakovich cited as inspiration for the concerto.

Shostakovich wrote the concerto for his young friend Mstislav Rostropovich in 1959. The precocious cellist learned the piece in only four days and premiered it from memory on October 4, 1959, with the famed Yevgeny Mravinsky conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic (now known as the St. Petersburg Philharmonic). The work's success may owe a lot to Rostropovich's consultation with the composer during its composition and the fact that he recorded the work in Moscow just two days after the premier and again later in November with Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra for CBS.

If you can remember back to the Kishwaukee Symphony Orchestra's performance of Shostakovich's *10th Symphony* at the end of last season,

one of the major musical themes running around within the work is the composer's DSCH theme. This is an abbreviation of his name which, in German, is Dmitri Schostakowitsch. DSCH uses the four notes D, E-flat (denoted Es in German), C and B (H in German). He uses that same theme in this concerto in all but the cadenza movement. He also uses some of his own music and, like many of his compatriots, folk music.

The concerto is non-traditionally scored and structured. Accompaniment for the solo cello features two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, a single lonely horn, timpani, celesta and strings. All of these accompanying instruments – especially the winds – have somewhat virtuosic parts, thus heightening tension for everyone. The non-traditional structure consists of two sections made up of four movements. The first movement, a section of its own, is followed by three played without pause. The third is a cadenza for the cello alone.

Our esteemed conductor, Linc Smelser, is also a cellist and has played and toured with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. He told this annotator that no other concerto for the cello illustrates as many of the various techniques in bowing, plucking, etc. as this one. This wide spectrum of required techniques makes the concerto one of the most difficult in the entire repertoire and requires a cellist of great skill to pull it off. Our young cellist tonight is certainly skilled enough to do it beautifully!

Symphony No. 2, Op. 132 ("Mysterious Mountain")

by Alan Hovhaness
(1911–2000)

American composer Alan Hovhaness' *Second Symphony*, or "*Mysterious Mountain*," is certainly the work by which he is best known today. The famous conductors who championed it, namely Leopold Stokowski, who conducted the premier, and Fritz Reiner, who first recorded it, greatly aided in furthering not only the symphony's reputation but also that of Hovhaness himself among accomplished composers worldwide.

Stokowski was already a fan of Hovhaness' music after conducting the premier of his *First Symphony* in 1942. Stokowski asked him to write something to celebrate the conductor's debut performance with the Houston Symphony Orchestra in October of 1955. Stokowski rejected the first

submission, a fanfare entitled *To the Mysterious Mountain*, and requested something more substantial. He soon received the three-movement symphony of very nearly the same title. Broadcast nationwide over NBC Radio, the composer became a household name.

According to the composer, the subtitle does not refer to a single mountain but rather to “the whole idea of mountains.” Stokowski supposedly suggested it and, fortunately for the composer and his symphony, the evocative title stuck and brought even more people to the work. Its success prompted the composer to immediately go to work on his next symphony in spite of the fact that he was never paid for the *Mysterious Mountain* commission.

In evoking the “mysterious mountain” atmosphere, Hovhaness employs exotic melodies and harmony to great effect. He mixes this exoticism with rich western harmony and structure. The hymn-like first movement uses the ancient Phrygian mode with the long melodic lines broken only by short phrases in the celesta.

Having made a thorough study of counterpoint in his mid-20s, Hovhaness employs the traditional western musical structure of the double fugue but makes it exotic with an oriental pentatonic theme. True to his own mysticism and saving the final movement for contemplation, the exhilarating climax of the work occurs in this second movement.

The third movement begins and ends with a hymn, but in the middle Hovhaness employs a melodic technique of Indian classical music known as a *raga*. This 13-beat motif sounds very unusual to our western ears but certainly heightens the exoticism Hovhaness sought to put on display. The symphony ends gorgeously and the listener is left satisfied but desiring to hear more of Hovhaness’ work. More can be found at www.hovhaness.com, where more than 430 works are listed among his compositions, 50 of which are symphonies!