



## PROGRAM NOTES

by Geoffrey Decker

### **Tchaikovsky: *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy Overture**

Giuseppe Verdi, Jean Sibelius, Hector Berlioz and myriad other composers, including Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, were inspired by Shakespeare's plays. In fact, Tchaikovsky wrote no fewer than three works with Shakespearean titles and subjects. Among these 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 *Romeo and Juliet* (the work has no opus number).

After the failed St. Petersburg premiere 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 Tchaikovsky. 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. The quiet and chorale-like music places the listener in the friar's chapel, a space of saintly goodness although perhaps tinged with naiveté. Underneath this quiet there is something foreboding in the lower strings. Something is not right, and we feel discomfort even in the quiet space of a chapel.

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 is almost unbearable. Adding to the excitement is that agitation and foreboding lying once again underneath.

Two 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.

Already performed in major European cities in two different prior forms of completion, Tchaikovsky eventually finished the final version of *Romeo and Juliet* Fantasy-Overture on September 10, 1880. The work received its premier almost six years later on May 1, 1886, when composer-conductor Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov conducted it in Tbilisi.

The work is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets in A, two bassoons, four horns in F, two trumpets in E, three trombones, tuba, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, harp and strings.

### **Prokofiev: *Romeo and Juliet* – Music from the Ballet**

With the subject for a ballet first suggested to him by Adrian Piotrovsky and Sergey Radlov, Sergei Prokofiev began composition on his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, Op. 64, based on their scenario, in September of 1935. It was to be what the Soviet government deemed a *dramballet* which, in other words, was a ballet fulfilling the rigid ideal of Soviet-era social realism, something completely unsuitable for classical dance and its freedom of movement and expression.

The subject of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was itself controversial from the start. Originally destined for the

Kirov Theater in Leningrad (St. Petersburg), a management change there led the work to soon be adopted for production at the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow. Even more controversy was created by Prokofiev himself who later wrote, "Living people can dance, the dying cannot," leading him to insert a happy ending with Romeo arriving just in time to avoid tragedy. The Soviets did not like this either and conductor Yuri Fayer eventually convinced Prokofiev that the traditional ending was the only way to end the ballet.

Although written in four months, *Romeo and Juliet* is the longest and most intensely dramatic ballet Prokofiev was to compose. After hearing him play the score on the piano, those in charge of the production rejected it out of hand deeming it unsuitable for dancing. Prokofiev worked hard revising the music over the next few months and the premiere finally came about not in Moscow but rather in Brno in what is now the Czech Republic on December 30, 1938.

What we know as the ballet today is the version first presented at the Kirov Theater in Leningrad on January 11, 1940. In spite of Prokofiev's objections, choreographer Leonid Lavrosky had significantly changed the score prior to the performance. The composer was somewhat appeased when the production was awarded the Stalin Prize. The ballet *Prokofiev and Juliet*, Op. 64, is now part of the standard repertoire for ballet companies and is considered one

of Prokofiev's greatest and most popular works, especially when heard in the concert hall in the form of one or more of the three suites compiled by the composer himself. Tonight's performance consists of parts of the first two. An attempt has been made below to clarify from which parts of the complete ballet the movements performed tonight derive:

1. *The Montagues and the Capulets* from Suite 2, Movement 1, which is an aggregation of Act III, Scene 1, No. 37, *Introduction* (just the beginning of the movement) and Act I, Scene 2, No. 13, *Dance of the Knights*.
2. *Madrigal* from Suite 1, Movement 3, which is taken from Act I, Scene 2, No. 16, *Madrigal*.
3. *Masks* from Suite 1, Movement 5, which is taken from Act I, Scene 2, No. 12, *Masks*.
4. *Romeo and Juliet* from Suite 1, Movement 6, which is from Act III, Scene 1, No. 38, *Romeo and Juliet*, or *Juliet's Bedroom*.
5. *Death of Tybalt* from Suite 1, Movement 7, which is taken from Act II, Scene 3, No. 35, *Romeo Decides to Avenge Mercutio's Death* (just the ending section).
6. *Romeo at Juliet's Tomb* from Suite 2, Movement 6, which is taken from Act 3, the Epilogue, No. 51, *Juliet's Funeral*.

The complete ballet is scored for one piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, one English horn,

two clarinets with the second doubling on E-flat clarinet, one bass clarinet, one tenor saxophone, two bassoons, one contrabassoon, six horns, three trumpets, one cornet, two trombones, one bass trombone, one tuba, two harps, piano, celesta, organ, two mandolins, timpani, a huge array of percussion and strings, including a viola d'amore often played by a solo violist. Of course, the scoring for the suites pares this back a bit.

### **Bernstein: Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story***

Our homage to Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* continues with a suite of dances selected by Leonard Bernstein from his music for one of the most beloved American musicals of all time, *West Side Story*. Conceived by dancer, director and choreographer Jerome Robbins with the story by Arthur Laurents, lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and music by Leonard Bernstein, *West Side Story* had a rocky - and complicated - genesis.

First of all, Robbins and Laurents wanted the setting on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City with the rivalry between Catholics and Jews. Laurents eventually dropped out and Stephen Sondheim was hired. After some time and more haggling, the three finally settled on the setting of the Upper West Side of Manhattan, which at that time was a multiracial, blue-collar neighborhood. Instead of the Capulets and the Montagues,

the rivals would be street gangs of different ethnicities, recent hispanic immigrants and whites. Once settled, Bernstein was excited to write music with a strong Latin beat and he did just that.

First produced on Broadway in 1957, *West Side Story* was a great success and in 1958 was nominated for six Tony Awards, including Best Musical, and won two of them. The musical has since been immortalized in two big Hollywood productions, the first from 1961 winning ten Academy Awards, or Oscars, including Best Picture and the second from 2021, winning one Oscar.

As stated before, in *West Side Story* we have two rival teenage street gangs, the Jets made up of white Americans and the Sharks, recently immigrated Puerto Ricans. They struggle for control of the Upper West Side. The former Jet, Tony, is the Romeo character who falls in love with Maria, the Juliet character who has recently arrived from Puerto Rico to marry Chino, a friend of the leader of the Sharks. At a dance in the high school gym, Tony and Maria catch a glimpse of one another across the dance floor and soon fall in love. They are sadly caught up in the rivalry and, in the end, tragedy strikes in the form of Tony's death.

The music is unmistakably Leonard Bernstein. So popular was *West Side Story* that in 1961 Bernstein put together a suite of the dances he composed for the musical and named the

collection, meant for concert performance, *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story*. He oversaw the orchestration for this more properly orchestral version carried out by Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal.

As written by James M. Keller, the annotator for the San Francisco Symphony, "The late Jack Gottlieb, who for many years served as Bernstein's amanuensis, provided this summary of the sections of the *Symphonic Dances* and how they relate to the action in the well-known musical:

1. Prologue: The growing rivalry between two teenage gangs, the Jets and Sharks.
2. "Somewhere": In a visionary dance sequence, the two gangs are united in friendship.
3. Scherzo: In the same dream, they break through the city walls, and suddenly find themselves in a world of space, air and sun.
4. Mambo: Reality again; competitive dance between the gangs.
5. Cha-Cha: The star-crossed lovers see each other for the first time and dance together.
6. Meeting Scene: Music accompanies their first spoken words.
7. "Cool" Fugue: An elaborate dance sequence in which the Jets practice controlling their hostility.
8. Rumble: Climactic gang battle during which the two gang leaders are killed.
9. Finale: Love music developing into a processional, which recalls, in tragic reality, the

vision of "Somewhere."  
The *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story* premiered in Carnegie Hall on February 13, 1961, with Lukas Foss conducting the New York Philharmonic in a pension fund gala titled "A Valentine for Leonard Bernstein." They are scored for one piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, one English horn, two clarinets, one E-flat clarinet, one bass clarinet, one alto saxophone, two bassoons, one contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, a huge percussion section, one harp, piano, celesta and strings. It lasts about 23 minutes.

And by the way, if you go to New York City looking for the setting of *West Side Story*, you will not find it as it is no more. In fact, it is where New York's famed Lincoln Center and many glamorous high-rise buildings with their outrageously-priced apartments now sit!

When powerful – and extremely controversial – New York City boss Robert Moses decided to create what we now know as Lincoln Center, he demolished 18 square blocks in what is known as New York's Upper West Side. In doing so, he destroyed 7000 low-income apartments

and 800 businesses. To those being displaced, the 4400 apartments he promised to build around the new Lincoln Center – 4000 of which were to be luxury apartments – were no compensation. He even went so far as to sell the land to a favored developer for \$7 per square foot and not the going rate of \$9.58. And the land under a building owned by the Kennedys was purchased for \$62.88 per square foot!

As often happens, the hardworking low-income people like the characters on both sides in the musical lost out as others profited greatly. The next time you visit Lincoln Center where the New York City Ballet, New York Philharmonic and the Metropolitan Opera are housed alongside other arts institutions like the famed Juilliard School of Music, remember those who were displaced. If you are interested in knowing more about Robert Moses and how he dramatically changed New York City for both good and bad, there is a well-researched Pulitzer Prize-winning biography about him titled *The Power Broker* by Robert A. Caro. It is highly recommended.

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