

Romeo and Juliet – Overture-Fantasy **PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY**

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) was one of the first conservatory-trained composers of Russia, having enrolled in the inaugural class of the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1862. This meant that he had studies in traditional harmony, musical forms (where sonata form ruled the Classical era), and counterpoint – all the rudiments of compositional technique. And through his family, he was in touch with the cultural world of Western Europe.

This was in contrast to “The Mighty Handful” of nationalist Russian composers including Mussorgsky (1839-1881), Bordin (1833-1887), Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908), Cui (1835-1918), and led by Mily Balakirev (1837-1910). These composers dived deeply into Russian and Asian culture including rural peasant songs, dances from the Silk Road, chants for Russian Orthodox services, and the like. They were largely self-taught as composers, and often had to struggle to produce works because they lacked the facility of a traditional compositional technique. It was hard to know if this struggle was a feature or a bug because of the value they placed on originality and the casting off of Western influences outside Russia.

Yet, as we saw in the history of the Tchaikovsky’s *Symphony No.2*, (1872) which the IPO played a few seasons ago, Tchaikovsky made enthusiastic use of Ukrainian folk songs and had an original, loosely constraining sense of symphonic form. Furthermore, when the piano arrangement of the finale of that *Symphony* was played at a soiree hosted by Rimsky-Korsakov, the reception was rapturous enthusiasm. So, it is a mistake to think of a firm cultural or social wall between Tchaikovsky and the Russian nationalists -- as warily as they might view each other. (Stravinsky stated that Tchaikovsky’s music “is often more profoundly Russian than music which has long since been awarded the facile label of Muscovite picturesqueness.”)

This point becomes obvious considering another early work of Tchaikovsky, his *Overture-Fantasy Romeo and Juliet* (1870, revised 1872 and 1880). The tale starts with the raw, 28-year-old, newly emerged professor of composition of the Moscow Conservatory contacting the eminent Balakirev. Tchaikovsky, who had premiered his first symphony and opera, but was still struggling to get traction in the musical world, had dedicated his overture, *Fatum* (1868) to Balakirev. The performance and reception were steeped in failure, yet though critical, Balakirev urged Tchaikovsky to write an overture on Shakespeare modeled after Balakirev’s overture to King Lear. The mind spins because this was not a Russian subject, and evidently Balakirev’s overture is not a free tone poem but a more traditional piece that uses the inherent drama of sonata form to make its narrative points. (An overture was one thing, but the technique-challenged Balakirev started his *Symphony No 1 in C major* as early as 1864 and did not complete it until 1898.)

One other personage may be mentioned in relation to the gestation of the *Romeo and Juliet Overture*, Désirée Artôt, who was a Belgian operatic soprano who somehow seemed to have captured Tchaikovsky’s romantic interest. Ms. Artôt was touring Russia in 1868, and they met very frequently in the evening after performances. Tchaikovsky described her to his brother,

Modest, as possessing “exquisite gesture, grace of movement, and artistic poise.” It was soon almost presumed that they were engaged, though there had been no formal declaration between them. As we have seen in the recent Leonard Bernstein biopic “Maestro,” there may be passably successful marriages between homosexual men and heterosexual women. But this was not to be, and she married a Spanish baritone named Padilla y Ramos in 1869. Nevertheless, Artôt may have been an inspiration for the love theme in *Romeo*. Certainly, others projected this, and the theme is in her name-coded key of D-flat (“Des” in German terminology). Balakirev praised *Romeo and Juliet's* love theme with a surprising personal statement: “... the second D-flat tune is delightful ... It is full of tenderness and the sweetness of love ... When I play it, I imagine you are lying naked in your bath and that the Artôt-Padilla herself is washing your stomach with hot lather from scented soap.”

There was an ongoing correspondence between Tchaikovsky and Balakirev throughout the compositional process, though it seems that Balakirev and his group only used positive terms for the love theme. Still, that was so admired that Balakirev was asked to give repeated piano-reduction performances. This got to the point that he actually memorized the piece, and the journalist, Stasov, who had originally coined the term, “The Mighty Handful,” now wanted to include Tchaikovsky as a sixth member!

It is hard to imagine that there was not “love at first [listen]” like the protagonists in the *Overture*, but the premier performance in Vienna in 1876 under Hans Richter was actually hissed. (Remember, this was the conservative bastion where Tchaikovsky’s *Violin Concerto* was synesthetically compared to the odor of turds.) Now, the “Love Theme” is so popular that it is often heard in commercials, popular cartoons, and TV shows – almost a caricature of love. So, our performance of the complete piece will allow us to experience this love music in the context of a masterful artwork.

The *Overture* is in sonata form, with a slow introduction and a postlude. It begins quietly with a somber, modal-minor musing for two bassoons and two clarinets. The strings and harp answer with modulations giving expressions of wondrous hope -- and danger. There follows a passage reminiscent of a Russian church chorale [Father Lawrence?] in the winds, with a stepping plucked accompaniment in the strings. The string and harp music returns giving way to hints of violence before the fighting of the clans is given full vent in the opening “Allegro giusto” (an unexaggeratedly fast tempo) of the first theme in B minor. This is treated contrapuntally where melodic lines ‘clash’ against other melodic lines and soon there is almost a concerto for crash cymbal as the violence erupts out of control. One can easily conjecture why this skillfully, academically-informed music was not favorably heard by “The Mighty Five.”

The second theme, in the above-mentioned D-flat major, is the wonderful Love Theme beginning languorously in the strings and developing hints of passion as it moves through the winds and horns. Syncopated tension returns as the development section begins, pitting some of the introductory music against the first theme which returns vigorously with more cymbal crashes. The recap starts (unusually) with the Love Theme now in D major, and given full-throated expression by the whole orchestra. But there are more clashes to come in B minor

before the angelic ending in B major, where Father Lawrence and Heaven seem to hold the answer for the transfigured lovers.

- *IPO Board Member Charles Amenta M.D.*