

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture

A bit of historical perspective can be of great assistance when considering Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. As Edward Downes has written: "The composers who have been inspired, or who thought they were inspired by Shakespeare, make an endless list. And in that list, Tchaikovsky is one of the few whose music speaks with the elemental passion and strife that grip us as do the words of Shakespeare. Yet incredible as it may seem, *Romeo and Juliet* was only the fourth of Tchaikovsky's published works. He composed it when he was twenty-nine. And it stands out among his works – a sudden blaze of inspiration, revealing a unique genius which though it seldom burned with a steady flame, reached peaks of intensity equaled by few."

The summer of 1869 found Tchaikovsky restless. His creative muse was devoid of ideas and lacking inspiration. Fellow composer Mily Balakirev prompted Tchaikovsky to consider Shakespeare's drama *Romeo and Juliet* as the subject for his next work. He even went so far as to provide him with a detailed written program and a corresponding outline of the musical forms that the work might utilize. Tchaikovsky was somewhat wary of Balakirev and although he admired him, he also found him to be pedantic and irksome. His suggestion, however, proved to be just the impetus that the composer needed at that time. Composition began in the fall and the first version was completed in November. Balakirev found much to criticize, starting with the opening introduction, and then a significant list of others. Tchaikovsky completed a thoroughly revised version, including a new introduction, in the summer of 1870. Balakirev was now able to tell him "It is your best work. This is the first piece by you which fascinates by the mass of its beauties, and in such a way that one without deliberation can call it good." Edward Downes adds "For the analytically inclined it is fascinating to see how beautifully and eloquently the dramatic thread of the Romeo and Juliet story dovetails with Tchaikovsky's romantic version of the traditional sonata-allegro form." Tchaikovsky completed a third version a decade later. Here, according to Gerald Abraham, the main changes were the addition of dynamic markings and a few other small details. This is the version that is heard today.

The Overture opens with a solemn introduction; a chant heard in the clarinets and bassoons, which represents the peace of Friar Lawrence. A turbulent *Allegro giusto* then bursts forth depicting the roiling conflict between the Montagues and the Capulets. Two quite lyrical themes then come forth to change and relax the tension. The first is Romeo's love song heard in the English horn and muted violas. Second is Juliet's passionate response by muted and divided strings. The music of the conflict returns as the development section, building to a return of Romeo's love theme. The orchestra then rises to a great climax at which point the lovers die. A funeral dirge follows after which Tchaikovsky concludes the tragedy with a volley of massive chords from the entire orchestra.