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Madison Symphony Orchestra Program Notes
by J. Michael Allsen
Pure Joy Opening Night: Magical Tchaikovsky
September 19, 2025

This 100th anniversary season opens with a pair of gala opening concerts, beginning with this all-Tchaikovsky program. The program opens with his take on Shakespeare's greatest love story, *Romeo and Juliet*, which includes what is certainly the most lush and romantic "love theme" ever written. Then Olga Kern—a favorite of MSO audiences and musicians alike—makes her sixth appearance with the orchestra as part of the celebration. Ms. Kern's previous appearances with the MSO were in 2009 (Beethoven, *Piano Concerto No. 3*), 2010 (Rachmaninoff, *Piano Concerto No. 2*), 2014 (Rachmaninoff, *Piano Concerto No. 2*), 2017 (Barber, *Piano Concerto*), and 2021 (Rachmaninoff, *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*). Here, she plays the profound first piano concerto, a now-standard work that was largely scorned when it was first played. We close the program with the lively *Theme and Variations* from Tchaikovsky's *Suite No. 3*, an entertaining work that ends with a brassy *polonaise*.

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* is certainly the most famous and beloved musical version of Shakespeare's story of "star-cross'd lovers."

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky
Born: May 7, 1840, Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia.
Died: November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg, Russia.

Overture-Fantasy: Romeo and Juliet

- **Composed**: Tchaikovsky composed this work in 1869 and revised it extensively in 1870 and 1880
- **Premiere**: March 1870, in Moscow.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: We have played *Romeo and Juliet* seven times at our subscription concerts between 1946 and 2016.
- **Duration**: 20:00.

Background

This was an early work, in which a 29-year-old Tchaikovsky was deeply influenced by a slightly older composer, Mily Balikirev.

The works of Shakespeare were the basis for dozens of Romantic operas and large instrumental pieces that have survived in today's concert repertoire, but the most popular of these is probably Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*. The idea of a large orchestral work based on Shakespeare's most famous drama and suggestions about the work's form came from Tchaikovsky's contemporary Mily Balikirev (1837-1910). Tchaikovsky was just beginning his career in the 1860s, and Balikirev was already the intellectual leader of an influential group of Russian nationalist composers known as the "Mighty Five." In 1868, Tchaikovsky dedicated an overture titled *Fate* to Balikirev. While *Fate* was a complete flop—Tchaikovsky later destroyed the score—it was the beginning of a close friendship, and Balikirev encouraged him to take *Romeo and Juliet* as a subject, even suggesting the programmatic structure of the overture. The subject of a tragic love affair may in fact have been on Tchaikovsky's mind at the time. He had been infatuated with a soprano named Désirée Artôt, who had just married someone else, and his brother later suggested that the overture grew out of unresolved feelings for Vladimir Gerard, a friend from several years earlier. Tchaikovsky was typically insecure during the overture's composition, writing at one point that: "I'm beginning to fear that my muse has flown off." Balikirev reviewed the work at every stage in its composition, and after some initial criticisms, wrote of his enthusiastic approval: "I am impatient to receive the entire score so that I may get a just impression of your clever overture, which is—so far—your best work. That you have dedicated it to me gives me the greatest pleasure." The first performance in 1870 was unsuccessful, and Tchaikovsky revised the work, incorporating several of Balikirev's suggestions. He revised it once more a decade later—the version that is familiar today—in particular reworking the dramatic ending.

What You'll Hear

This work, which the composer labelled a "Fantasy-Overture," is set in the outlines of sonata form, but it can be understood as a reflection of Shakespeare's tragedy.

Though *Romeo and Juliet* has a conventional sonata form, Tchaikovsky clearly intended it to be understood in programmatic terms. The solemn theme of the introduction represents Friar Lawrence, whose good-hearted efforts at matchmaking are swept away by the feud between the Montagues and Capulets. The introduction becomes gradually more intense until it finally explodes into the first main theme, an agitated figure that vividly recalls the bloody vendetta

between the families of the two lovers. The sweeping second theme, first hinted at by the English horn, represents the lovers themselves and their passion. (This melody has, of course become a virtual musical cliché for romantic love. Insert mental image here: two lovers running towards one another—in slow motion—across a field of flowers…) These two themes are placed in opposition throughout the overture, with occasional mediation by the "Friar Lawrence" theme, mediation that will be to no avail—the lovers are destined to die a tragic death. In the coda, there is a funeral benediction by Friar Lawrence and a last dirgelike version of the love theme, before the overture comes to an abrupt and strident ending.

The initial scornful reaction to this work certainly gave no hint that it would become one of the most popular of all romantic piano concertos.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 1 in B-flat minor, Op. 23

- **Composed**: Late 1874.
- **Premiere**: October 25, 1875 in Boston, with Hans von Bülow as piano soloist
- **Previous MSO Performances**: The Madison Symphony Orchestra has performed the concerto on seven previous occasions. Soloists have included Edward Collins (1937), Peter Paul Loyanovich (1949), Marian Perkins (1954), James Tocco (1969), Earl Wild (1980), Vladimir Viardo (1992), and Vladimir Feltsman (2004).
- **Duration**: 32:00.

Background

The composer was deeply hurt when his intended soloist, Nicolai Rubinstein, rejected the concerto, but he remained determined to have it performed. It was eventually taken up by German pianist Hans von Bülow.

When Tchaikovsky finished his *Piano Concerto No. 1* in December of 1874, he asked Nicolai Rubinstein to listen to a performance. Tchaikovsky considered Rubinstein to be the "best pianist in Moscow" and planned to dedicate the new concerto to him, so he quite naturally sought Rubinstein's criticism. On Christmas Eve, he met Rubinstein at the Moscow Conservatory, and played through the entire concerto, which had not yet been orchestrated, while Rubinstein sat in stony silence. In a letter to his patron, Nadezda von Meck, Tchaikovsky described how, immediately after the final chord, Rubinstein launched into a scathing attack on the concerto, calling it "worthless," "unplayable," and "vulgar." Deeply insulted, Tchaikovsky stormed out of the room. Rubinstein followed

and attempted to conciliate the composer by offering to perform the concerto...if Tchaikovsky would only revise the concerto according to his suggestions. Tchaikovsky answered, "I will not alter a single note! I will publish the work exactly as it is!"

While we only have Tchaikovsky's emotional version of this incident, it is hardly surprising that he decided to dedicate the concerto to someone other than Rubinstein. When he sent a score to the German pianist-conductor Hans von Bülow, Bülow replied enthusiastically that "The ideas are so original, the form is so mature, ripe, distinguished in style." Bülow performed the work for the first time while on tour in Boston. There is a historical footnote to this first performance. When Bülow sent a telegram to Tchaikovsky telling him of the ecstatic response to the concerto's premiere, it was apparently the first cable ever sent between Boston and Moscow.

What You'll Hear

The concerto is in three movements:

- A large sonata-form movement with a long introduction and two cadenzas.
- A lighter second movement with songlike outer sections and a fast-paced central trio.
- A fierce, intensely rhythmic finale.

The opening movement begins with a vast introduction (*Allegro non troppo*), opening with a bold four-note horn motive. The solo part takes control almost immediately with crashing chords, expanding upon this theme. The body of the movement (*Allegro con spirito*) begins with a nervous syncopated tune that, according to one of his letters, Tchaikovsky heard from a blind Ukrainian beggar. Clarinet and woodwinds introduce a more lyrical second idea. The development ends in the first of two enormous cadenzas, and an abbreviated recapitulation leads to an even grander and more virtuosic cadenza.

Though they are dwarfed by the huge opening, the second and third movements are just as innovative. The second movement manages to combine a traditional slow movement with a lighter scherzo. The main theme of the outer sections (*Andante semplice*) is a popular French tune *Il faut s'amuser, danser et rire* (*You must enjoy yourself by dancing and laughing*). This was apparently a great favorite of Tchaikovsky's, but it may also have been a melancholy tribute to Désirée Artôt, a soprano who had broken his heart a few years earlier. The central section (*Prestissimo*) has fleeting scherzo-style music. This is brought to a sudden conclusion by a bark from the brass and brief solo cadenza. The finale (*Allegro con fuoco*) is a kind of rhythmic showpiece with constantly shifting and combined meters. A fiery main theme alternates with widely contrasting material, but the whole movement dances. At the end, a final solo cadenza and broadening of the tempo lead to a brilliant coda.

Tchaikovsky's rarely heard *Suite No.3* is a collection of four colorful character pieces. The last movement, heard here, is a delightfully witty *Theme and Variations*.

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Theme and Variations* from *Suite No. 3 in G Major, Op. 55

- **Composed**: Spring and summer of 1884.
- **Premiere**: January 24, 1885, in St. Petersburg.
- **Previous MSO Performances**: We played the complete suite in 1977 and 2006; the *Theme and Variations* has additionally been played in 1956 and 1976.
- **Duration**: 19:00.

Background

Writing this piece, which Tchaikovsky very much enjoyed, served as a kind of "compositional coffee break" between two large and very serious pieces, the opera *Mazeppa*, and his *Manfred Symphony*.

Tchaikovsky's four orchestral suites are performed far too infrequently. In these works, which generally cost him much less work (and mental anguish) than the symphonies, he could let his imagination run free. In a letter to Nadejda von Meck, written as he was working on the *Suite No. 3*, he said that "I have begun a new composition in the form of a suite. I find this form extraordinarily sympathetic, since it isn't constraining, and demands no dependence on any tradition or rules." The composition of his suites was often done in interludes between larger works, seemingly as a refreshing break, and this sense of relaxation comes through in the music.

The third suite comes from a very productive and successful time in Tchaikovsky's career. In the mid-1880s, the turmoil of his failed marriage was largely behind him, and he had found a thoroughly satisfying relationship in his correspondence with von Meck, a wealthy married woman who served as Tchaikovsky's patron and closest *confidante* for several years. He was also enjoying tremendous success as a composer at home and throughout Europe. 1884 opened with the successful premiere of his opera *Mazeppa* in both Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in March he was honored by Tsar Alexander III with the Order of St. Vladimir, Fourth Class, Imperial Russia's highest civilian award. He then retreated to his sister's country estate at Kamenka, to relax and, he hoped, to begin work on a new symphony. In his diary entry of April 28, he wrote: "I have been trying to lay the foundation of a

new symphony... Walked in the garden and found the germ, not of a symphony, but of a future suite." He worked on the suite throughout May and June, originally planning a five-movement piece with a closing set of variations but eventually abandoning an opening movement titled *Contrasts*. (This music was later recycled in his Op.56 *Concert-Fantasy*.) The work was complete on August 1.

In a thoroughly politic move, Tchaikovsky dedicated the *Suite No.3* to the conductor Max Erdmannsdorfer, as an apology for an unintended snub—Tchaikovsky had missed the Moscow premiere of the *Suite No. 2* in February, which Erdmannsdorfer had conducted. When the *Suite No. 3* was finally performed in St. Petersburg in 1885, conducted by Hans von Bülow, it was an immediate success. After the concert, he wrote to von Meck: "Never have I had such a triumph. I could see that the greater part of the audience was touched and grateful. Such moments are the best in an artist's life."

What You'll Hear

We end this program with the final movement of the *Suite No. 3*, a lively theme and variations, that culminates in a brass-dominated *Polonaise*.

The lengthy last movement is a theme and twelve variations that have a tremendous musical and emotional range. The theme, laid out by the strings, is a simple Classical-style melody. Tchaikovsky then explores this theme exhaustively, in variations that proceed from simple decoration to almost complete musical transformations. Many of Tchaikovsky's takes on his melody are delightfully witty—listen, for example for the tongue-in-cheek reference to the *Dies irae* in Variation 4, and the pseudo-Russian Orthodox chant of Variation 7. By Variation 10, he transforms the piece briefly into a violin concerto. The final and most extended variation is marked *Finale Polacca* and serves as a capstone. Brass fanfares announce the opening of this section, and the brass lead most of this forceful finale. [Note: In 1947, choreographer George Balanchine exploited the emotional range of this movement in a ballet. *Theme and Variations* was among his most successful ballets and remains in the repertoire of several companies nearly 80 years later.]

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