

## Adrian Symphony Orchestra Program Notes

# Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture

Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840 - 1893)

The idea for an opera based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was presented to a very young Tchaikovsky by the Russian Composer Mily Balakirev in the fall of 1860. At that time Tchaikovsky was 29, the same age as Shakespeare when he wrote his play of the same name. Tchaikovsky told his friend, Balakirev, that he was going through a dry period. "I'm completely played out," he said, "and not one even mildly tolerable musical idea comes into my head. I'm beginning to fear that my muse has flown off to some distant place..." His friend described how he had been composing music for some of Shakespeare's plays and suggested that Peter try using *Romeo and Juliet* as a theme. Tchaikovsky did take his friend's advice and began work on an overture incorporating a Friar Laurence introductory section, the conflict between the Capulets and the Montagues, and Romeo and Juliet's love theme. The work was difficult and painstaking for the composer, who wrote and polished and scrutinized his work for several years before arriving at something he could make public. The first draft was completed in 1869, dedicated to Balakirev, and the work premiered in March of 1870 to a less-than-enthusiastic audience. He spent the summer extensively revising his Fantasy Overture, adding a completely new introduction and reworking the score and orchestration. The "new" version premiered in 1872 with more success but Tchaikovsky continued to make alterations until 1880, when the final version was made available to concert audiences. It was his first major masterpiece.

In a letter to his brother in 1881 Tchaikovsky mentions that he has decided to compose a complete opera on that "old, but eternally new subject, *Romeo and Juliet*." Fragments of what may have been parts of that work have been found, including a lovers' duet, but no complete opera has ever been discovered. The fragment for the love duet was completed and orchestrated by Sergey Taneyev, but that is all that survives of Tchaikovsky's proposed opera.

Tchaikovsky used traditional sonata form for his overture. A slow introduction describes the matchmaker Friar Laurence, using woodwind chords. A heavy martial theme follows in the allegro giusto section, describing the conflict between the feuding families. Tension builds, and the low woodwinds transition listeners to the lovers' theme. The development section expands on the violence between the families while Friar Laurence tries to make peace. We then hear a recapitulation of the love theme featuring the horn, and the battle is interrupted and woodwind chords point to the deaths of the two lovers. An insistent drumbeat accompanies the love theme and resolves in the closing bars.

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