

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

*Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture*

BORN: May 7, 1840, in Kamsko-Votkins, Russia

DIED: November 6, 1893, in Saint Petersburg

WORK COMPOSED: 1869–1880

WORLD PREMIERE: March 16, 1870, in Moscow. Nikolai Rubinstein conducted the orchestra of the Russian Music Society.

“What a subject for an opera!” exclaimed Hector Berlioz of *Romeo and Juliet*. “How it [lends] itself to music!” Berlioz was not alone in finding Shakespeare’s tragedy well suited for musical treatment. *Romeo and Juliet* has inspired operas by many composers (most notably another Frenchman, Charles Gounod), as well as orchestral pieces and other works. One of the most famous of these closes our concert.

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky wrote his “fantasy overture” on *Romeo and Juliet* in the autumn of 1869 and made minor revisions to the score several times over the next decade. The piece was received indifferently at its initial performance, in Moscow the following year, and subsequently fared no better — and sometimes far worse — in the West. But Tchaikovsky lived to see that judgement reversed, and today his *Romeo and Juliet* stands among the most popular evocations of Shakespeare in the orchestral repertory.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: Tchaikovsky makes no effort to trace the story of *Romeo and Juliet* in music. Instead, he focuses on three principal elements of the drama, which he treats in turn. The long introductory section conveys a sense of resigned spirituality very much in character with Shakespeare’s Friar Laurence. There follows a violent episode, complete with cymbal crashes to represent the clash of Montague and Capulet swords. Finally, the love of Romeo and Juliet is represented in a soaring melody.

© 2016 Paul Schiavo