

Romeo and Juliet – Love, Storytelling and Artistic Expression!

I am once more delighted to write for our **On Stage** readers and grateful to the NCPA for the opportunity to do so. As many of you will know, my musings are a continuing part of the NCPA's commitment to music appreciation and audience development - a process of discovery and sharing to which I am equally committed. Our hope is that **On Stage** readers who come to our concerts at the Symphony Orchestra of India will have an experience made richer by shared information. Our ultimate reward, of course, would be that **On Stage** readers who do *not* come to concerts at the Symphony Orchestra of India, would take the 'leap of faith' and cross the threshold. Once they do, we are convinced, - and their music lover friends will tell them so – they will stay for good. What better way to carry one across the threshold than to discuss the whole thesis that is "Romeo and Juliet". It is a huge subject that couldn't possibly fit into the scope of this article. Nevertheless, it is always of use to tackle timeless issues. There may be no answers, but certain areas take on a clarity of their own and lead to further discovery elsewhere.

"Love is a many splendoured thing!" How inscrutable and incomplete that phrase is. The whole idea of love seems particularly perfect and divinely ordered. I suppose out of all the big ones, - **faith; joy; beauty; hope; truth; - love** should be equally endowed with some otherworldly quality. But then, once love is in the human ambit it is coloured by all the non-divine, distinctly human failings of jealousy, betrayal and of course death. However, since theology and psychiatry are not in the purview of this article we must simply examine evidence. It is a paradox that the successful love story is that which provides the most entertainment, and therefore must contain all the human failings to win the crowd. The *Romeo and Juliet* story predates Shakespeare's 1597 essay in to love's tragic quality. He drew his inspiration from two earlier literary works to cobble together the famous play. Shakespeare was not going to leave it at that. There is the tragic love of *Othello* – also taken from an earlier source. The original Seneca has the husband beat the wife to death with stockings that have been filled with stones. I suppose a simple smother with a pillow would not have entertained the Roman audiences. Shakespeare also gives us 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' – which is the comedic edge of love – and opens the door for all the modern interpretations of alternate sexuality.

Whichever way one looks at it, the entertainment world has been transfixed with the measure of tragic love and the plots it engenders. Grand opera of all kinds – even the elevated Greco based plots of Gods and Nymphs would have to pack up and go home if Love could not be explored through the lens of Jealousy, Betrayal and more often than not result in Death. It is almost impossible to find an opera plot without this mix of emotion. The Romeo and Juliet story alone has led to at least 27 operas from the early singspiel opera by Georg Benda with its happy ending to the more established Gounod and Bellini's extraordinary *I Capuleti e I Montecchi* which is less Shakespeare and more Vaccai.

The story, compels its way into sheer orchestral music as handily as opera. There is Hector Berlioz' 1839 *Romeo and Juliette*, a huge work with chorus and orchestra. Then one comes to the age of the Tone Poem, made possible by Richard Strauss. Though Strauss does not take up this story, a contemporary of his, Tchaikovsky writes the famous *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy overture*, (coming to rest on its final edition by 1880) catapulting the Symphonic Fantasy genre to popularity. Later, a compatriot, Sergei Prokofiev takes up the motif in his extraordinary ballet. It is these last two pieces that provide meat for the Symphony Orchestra of India in this forthcoming February 2014 season. An exposé of the two pieces follows.

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture

The exact level of torment that Tchaikovsky suffered through his life is hard to appreciate, even with hindsight and prying research into private letters. How does one reconcile the extraordinary pattern of trauma, and feelings of angst, loneliness and unworthiness that accompanied him from childhood to his grave? His early childhood was rocked by the death of his mother from cholera, on June 25th, 1854. This event is considered by all who review his life, to be of major significance – providing him with vivid, grief stricken memories that never left him. His father, who luckily recovered after a bout with the same disease, suggested that he return to school to get his mind off things.

Tchaikovsky's latent homosexuality did not create a constant internal struggle within himself – as sometimes is the case – but rather understood that betrayal or being found out in a society that totally denied its inclusion warranted huge amounts of care and worry. In fact, Tchaikovsky was quite active in pursuit of his male lovers, and was frequently on European tours with one or other companion. Finding recourse in the engagement to the Belgian soprano Desiree Artot in 1868 was a public act of deflection – and as such failed miserably, as she married another man without warning in 1869. By all accounts Tchaikovsky claimed love for her - but his only real devotion to a woman was manifested in the platonic and enabling relationship he had with Nadezhda von Meck, his benefactor from the 1870s to 1890s.

In 1868 Tchaikovsky was already a professor at the Moscow Conservatory, where he had been led by his close relationship with his mentor Anton Rubinstein. Rubinstein favoured a western style for composition, which brought him, and his protégé Tchaikovsky into the critical eye of the *Moguchaya kuchka* or the Mighty Five. This was the group of ardently nationalistic Russian composers Cui, Rimsky-Korsakov, Borodin, Mussorgsky and Balakirev, their undoubted leader.

Though Tchaikovsky was very taken by writing on a Shakespearean theme it was ostensibly Balakirev that sought to tell him the manner in which he should proceed. Surprisingly, Tchaikovsky was still prone to listen, agonize, amend, worry and relent – while it seems that Balakirev enjoyed 'skewering' Tchaikovsky, playing on his insecurities and offering his own works as a template.

The *Romeo and Juliet Fantasy Overture* with which we are left today has undergone several versions, the first of which (1869) was received poorly because the audience was more interested in fêting the affair that Nikolai Rubinstein the conductor had with a female student at the Conservatory. Tchaikovsky bemoaned the silent lack of appreciation at the dinner that followed the concert. The second version (1870) was the result of several sharp observations by Balakirev and resulted in the placement of the wonderful 'love theme' which, truth be known, was inspired by a male lover. The third and final version (1880) came almost a decade later in a reworking that was conducted by Ippolitov-Ivanov.

Nevertheless, the work is vintage Tchaikovsky. The warmth, the vigour, the passion, the structural form, the dynamic orchestration are all glowingly present. The music evokes the storyline at every stage, creating a magnificent panorama. The opening *chorale* of Friar Lawrence's Cell, perhaps more Russian Orthodox than Tuscan Catholic, gives way to the bloody clash of swords, as if Tybalt and Mercutio were actually 'having at it' in the viola section. And then, yes, there is that ability to spin a melody so transporting and intoxicating that, when all fades away and the lights are out, this very melody, transporting and intoxicating, is keeping the listener awake at night with the power of a triple espresso.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Romeo and Juliet Suite

Prokofiev's life, career and working style reflects his extraordinary presence in the global arena marked equally by his 'on again-off again' relationship with the authorities in the USSR. His early compositions, especially for piano are marked with an iconoclastic, willful, unconventional, revolution of their own. By 1908/9 Prokofiev had graduated in composition from the conservatory and by 1913/14 was the pride of the student body. He garnered the coveted Rubinstein Award by submitting and playing his own First Concerto, instead of choosing a customary classical piece. The unbridled, unconventional Prokofiev train was leaving the station.

In June 1914 he met with Diaghilev in London and was introduced to the music of Stravinsky through *Petroushka*, *The Firebird* and of course, *The Rite of Spring*. It is safe to say that no composer effected and influenced Prokofiev more than Igor Stravinsky. Following the 1917 Revolution Prokofiev left for the United States – with the publicized intent of returning in a few months. He remained until 1922 and his New York and Chicago periods saw the writing of the *Scythian Suite*, *The Love of Three Oranges*, *The Tale of the Buffoon* and many other works that satiated his desire for an operatic or theatrical setting. He was completely mesmerized by the possibilities exhibited by Stravinsky's music, and tried in this period to compete haplessly with both Stravinsky and Rachmaninov, before a public that expected him to outshine both.

The Paris period from 1922-36 brought him closer to home, and having never completely lost touch, was invited home to the Leningrad PO as early as 1923. In 1927 when he did finally return home almost nine years later, he was fêted on tour and returned a 'conquering hero' more than a 'prodigal son'. His openly nationalistic tendencies and his ability to praise, at every step, the course that his homeland had taken, made his subsequent returns palatable and almost necessary for the authorities – as they searched for reasons to be proud. By 1933 he had received his first Soviet commission and it was a year later, at the suggestion of the Kirov Ballet, that he embarked on his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, from which the suite is compiled. The subject was controversial and by the time it was taken over by the Bolshoi in Moscow, there was an attempt underway to rewrite Shakespeare. After all, Prokofiev noted "...living people can dance, the dead cannot." Having Romeo arrive in the 'nick of time' to change the ending into a moment of jubilation was the beginning of the end for the piece, that was then rejected out of hand. It was reworked and revised several times, to regain a place in the performing world. Prokofiev was to remain in the USSR for the rest of his life. His disappointment over *Romeo and Juliet* would not have measured against the series of heart attacks that followed, the outbreak of World War II, the move to the comparative safety but emptiness of Kazakhstan and the disruption forever of his Muscovite existence.

Yet, there is a quintessential Prokofiev sound that permeates all his work, including the *Romeo and Juliet* Suite. The sound reveals something new, something fresh in melody and orchestration. The structural form belies his strict training and yet, if one was to name a

Russian who had the adventurousness and daring exhibited by the European movements of the Second Viennese School or the Impressionism of the French, it would undoubtedly be Prokofiev.

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