

Program Notes

Marin Alsop Returns
by James McQuillen

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)

Romeo and Juliet Overture-Fantasy

Scored for two flutes, piccolo, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.

Performance time is approximately twenty minutes.

First performed by the Eugene Symphony in November 1966 under the direction of Lawrence Maves.

Tchaikovsky wrote his symphonic fantasy on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* with considerable input from Mily Alexeievich Balakirev, the leader of St. Petersburg's "Mighty Handful," a circle of prominent amateur composers. Balakirev had conducted the 1869 premiere of Tchaikovsky's first tone poem, *Fatum*, and then given the younger composer an unsparing critique of the work. Shortly thereafter he proposed a new piece, offering not just the subject—Balakirev was familiar with Shakespeare, having written incidental music for *King Lear* some years before—but also a general outline, a key scheme and a brief sketch of some of the music.

Balakirev's plan for *Romeo and Juliet* aimed to balance programmatic and formal considerations by assigning references from the play to elements of sonata form: Friar Laurence to the introduction, the Capulet-Montague feud to the first *allegro* theme and the young couple's love to the second. Tchaikovsky followed it faithfully, and after the mixed reaction to the premiere in 1870, he further responded to Balakirev's criticisms by rewriting the introduction for more of a liturgical sound, excising a fugue and revising the ending. A decade later he revisited the piece one more time, reworking the coda into the form almost all audiences hear today but retaining one feature to which Balakirev had raised a strong objection: the thumping chords of the last four bars, a final bit of brutal emphasis on the tragedy.

Leonard Bernstein (1918-1990)

Serenade after Plato's "Symposium"

Scored for solo violin, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.

Performance time is approximately thirty one minutes.

First performed by the Eugene Symphony in January 1992 under the direction of Marin Alsop, with Robert McDuffie as violin soloist.

A violin concerto in all but its title, Bernstein's *Serenade* is among a handful of distinctive and enduring works he completed in the mid-1950s, including *Candide*, *West Side Story* and the score for the film *On the Waterfront*. The famously literate composer had been reading Plato when the Koussevitsky Foundation commissioned the piece in 1951, and he drew on Plato's *Symposium* (a title sometimes rendered as "The Drinking Party") for its formal organization and overall thrust. In his own note, he cautioned that the music was not literally programmatic, but allowed that "the music, like the dialogue, is a series of related statements in praise of love, and generally follows the Platonic form through the succession of speakers at the banquet. The 'relatedness' of the movements does not depend on common thematic material, but rather on a system whereby each movement evolves out of elements in the preceding one."

He goes on to outline the music within the general framework of the *Symposium*. The first movement corresponds to the opening encomiums, the first "a lyrical oration in praise of Eros" by Phaedrus and the second Pausanias' response, which Bernstein casts in sonata form. The playwright Aristophanes follows by taking the role of "the bedtime story-teller, invoking the fairytale mythology of love"—a departure from Plato, whose Aristophanes delivers a comic-satiric speech. A brief, brilliant fugato scherzo stands for Eryximachus, in another departure (the physician speaks before the playwright in the *Symposium*), and the host Agathon's

Program Notes

Marin Alsop Returns
by James McQuillen

subsequent panegyric takes the form of a gorgeous, lyrical song. The finale's somber introduction echoes Socrates, who is interrupted by the drunken, party-crashing Alcibiades—an exuberant close that in Bernstein's *Serenade* carries a characteristic jazz flavor.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony #2 in D major, op. 73

Scored for two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings.

Performance time is approximately forty minutes.

First performed by the Eugene Symphony on February 1967 under the direction of Lawrence Maves.

Brahms's First and Second Symphonies have often been compared to Beethoven's Fifth and Sixth: the first of the pair is tense and conflicted, the second is a model of lyricism and pastoral vitality. In Brahms's case, the moods of the pieces are mirrored in their histories. He spent 15 years of struggle and indecision on the First, as he sought to assume a place in the symphonic tradition beyond Beethoven's long shadow. Then in 1877, a year after completing the First, the 44-year-old Brahms wrote the Second in four months while summering on the shores of Lake Worth in the Austrian village of Pörschach.

Trying to get a sense of the Second from Brahms's correspondence is a tricky exercise in triangulation. To his intimate friend Clara Schumann, he described it as “elegiac.” To his publisher, Fritz Simrock, he wrote, “The new symphony is so melancholy that you can't stand it. I have never written anything so sad, so minorish: the score must appear with a black border.” To the critic Eduard Hanslick: “In the course of the winter I shall let you hear a symphony that sounds so cheerful and delightful you will think I wrote it especially for you, or rather for your young wife.” The music's ambiguities—sunny on the surface, darker beneath—are at its expressive core.

Basses open the symphony with a rocking figure, from one note to an adjacent note and back, that provides the basis for much of the work's later material. The first theme soon emerges in the form of a sweet, soaring melody in violins and flutes, followed shortly by the second theme, a gentle tune in triple meter strongly reminiscent of the composer's famous lullaby. Brahms then embarks on a lengthy development with expansive orchestration, searching harmonies and restless, unstable rhythms. Long-withheld resolutions eventually emerge with maximum expressiveness, and the coda arrives with what Brahms biographer Jan Swafford describes as “yearning twilight wistfulness... as if looking back on something forever lost.”

That twilight, now with a heightened sense of sadness and disquiet, dominates the Adagio. Gracious yet intense, the movement develops through a succession of poignant pronouncements in strings and winds with solemn undercurrents in the low brass until, at long last, it attains a state of reflective peace at the close. Sweetness and light return in the Allegro grazioso, the leisurely charm of which is twice punctuated by boisterous, dancing outbursts. The brisk finale presents an abundance of energetic themes; its exhilaration repeatedly threatens to spin out of control and finally ends in a delirious affirmation of D Major.