

EL PASO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
FEBRUARY 21 & 22, 2025
PROGRAM NOTES

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

Born May 7, 1840 – Votkinsky, Russia

Died November 6, 1893 – St. Petersburg, Russia

***Romeo and Juliet* overture – Fantasy**

The influence of William Shakespeare on the entire world of art is immortal. His work is so cherished that many of the great artists who have inspired us throughout history simply considered themselves artistic servants and admirers of the legendary playwright. Nineteenth-century romantic music is filled with these individuals, one of them being Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky.

While Tchaikovsky did not dedicate as much of his output to Shakespeare as Hector Berlioz or Giuseppe Verdi, he made his admiration clear with *Romeo and Juliet*. While the most famous and successful musical renditions of the love tragedy come from Sergei Prokofiev, they are based on a larger work — a ballet that was arranged into several orchestral suites. Tchaikovsky's version is different and unique given it is set as a concert overture lasting only 20 minutes.

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* had a rough life for the first several years of its existence. Composed in 1869 and premiered in 1870, the first performance was a failure for strange reasons—Nikolai Rubinstein, the conductor of the premiere, had just been convicted of a scandal, much to the public's ire, and the distraction clearly took its toll on the audience's ability to focus on the music being performed.

In 1872, Tchaikovsky had a heavily revised version of the work premiered in hopes of satisfying critics who scrutinized the original version. Finally, in 1880, Tchaikovsky edited the ending of the 1872 rewrite, leading to the version we hear today.

The piece explores three themes from Shakespeare's story: Friar Lawrence, the feud between the Montagues and Capulets, and the love scenes between the two title characters.

Serenade for Strings in C major, op. 48

Serenades for strings became an outlet for romantic-era composers to pay homage to their earlier and more classical peers without fully diving into a chamber work.

The post-Beethoven romantic era saw the size of musical performances exploding. Orchestras were getting larger and larger with every passing decade and the light-hearted, more intimate orchestras of the 18th century seemed to be quickly disappearing. Thankfully, several 19th-century musical champions spent time creating orchestral music on a smaller scale, paying homage to pre-Beethoven techniques. Today, we call it the serenade for strings.

Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings in C Major, Op. 48* is one of three works that dominate the 19th century contributions to the genre (the others coming from Antonin Dvorak and Edward Elgar). Being an adamant admirer of Mozart, Tchaikovsky stated that in part the work is a tribute to him and meant to

reflect his charm and poise. In reality, the work is purely Tchaikovsky and confirmed that Russia's most notable composer could imprint his illustrious sonic fingerprint into music free of woodwinds and brass.

Serenade for Strings was first performed in 1880. During Tchaikovsky's sole trip to the United States in 1891, it was one of the few pieces played, and conducted, by him.

Sergei Prokofiev

Born April 23, 1891 – Sontsivka, Ukraine

Died March 5, 1953 – Moscow, Russia

Romeo and Juliet Suites

Fascinatingly, Sergei Prokofiev's work flowed in reverse of how music was progressing through time during the 20th century. A devout modernist early on, Prokofiev's first works were jarring and angular to the extent of infuriating his teachers and listeners.

As he became more and more notable throughout the early 1900s, Prokofiev's unique style was landing him in hot water. "Modernists" were frowned upon by the Soviet state, and Prokofiev fled to the United States in 1917 to avoid possible persecution. This marked the first noticeable change in the composer's style as his music began to take on a more romantic touch, while maintaining a clearly modernist influence. It was during this time he would premiere his now immensely popular *Piano Concerto No. 3* and *The Love for Three Oranges*.

Prokofiev re-entered the Soviet Union in 1933, marking the final phase of his career and compositional style. One of his first projects was his 1935 ballet *Romeo and Juliet*—a large piece at 150 minutes in length. It was expected to fail immediately, however, given theater directors were skeptical of the music's danceability. Out of frustration, Prokofiev devised a clever strategy; arrange the ballet into two orchestral suites that could act as "previews" to spark interest in the full piece. The suites came in 1936 proving Prokofiev correct. Audiences demanded to see the full production and before long multiple theaters were bidding for the first performance.

This evening you will hear a compilation of movements selected from the two suites, a common practice in today's concert halls. By freely selecting movements, orchestras can pick exactly what scenes from the timeless play they want to present musically.

Nathan Black is the general manager of the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras and a section cellist in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he produces and hosts 88.5 FM KTEP's *El Paso Symphony Orchestra Broadcast*, and as of 2022 is the resident lecturer of EPSO's "Opening Notes" series.