

Chapel Hill Philharmonia

Hill Hall — University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

7:30 p.m. Sunday, December 8, 2013

Evan Feldman, Guest Conductor

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Romeo and Juliet *Orchestral Suites*, Op. 64bis, ter

Scene (the Street Awakens)

Minuet (the Arrival of the Guests)

Romeo and Juliet

Montagues and Capulets (Dance of the Knights)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Symphony No. 7 in A major, Op. 92

Allegretto

Intermission

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 73

Allegro non troppo

Adagio non troppo

Allegretto grazioso (quasi andantino)

Allegro con spirito

Star-Crossed Lovers: Music with Passion

From forth the fatal loins of these two foes,
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life

—Prologue, *Romeo and Juliet*, William Shakespeare

Prokofiev: *Romeo and Juliet*

We know the story. Children of the rival Montague and Capulet clans fall in love at first sight, but “the stars” fate them for misfortune. For a brief time it seems that the brightness of day may outshine astrological destiny. Romeo spies his beloved on her balcony at dawn: “But soft, what light through yonder window breaks? It is the east and Juliet is the sun!” However, the dying Mercutio’s curse to the opposing families proves prophetic: “A plague on both your houses.” Seeking to help Juliet evade a forced marriage and wed Romeo, Friar Laurence gives her a potion to induce a deep trance. Unaware of the ruse, Romeo thinks the comatose Juliet has died. In his grief he swallows a lethal poison. Awakening, Juliet sees Romeo dead, takes his dagger, and joins him in suicide.

William Shakespeare’s romance has inspired vast quantities of music including 27 operas and the musical *West Side Story*. Sergei Prokofiev’s ballet of *Romeo and Juliet* is danced world-wide. However, its composer fell victim to another curse -- “may you live in interesting times”; he was buffeted by revolutionary changes in music and in Russian society. Prokofiev entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904 at age thirteen and emerged as an *enfant terrible* whose explosive pianistic style and radical compositions challenged convention. Eager to lead the Russian avant-garde, he approached the impresario Sergey Diaghilev whose Paris-based *Ballet Russes* was the vehicle for Igor Stravinsky’s rise to fame. Diaghilev proffered a commission, but, chastened by the riotous premiere of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, he rejected Prokofiev’s first attempt as too boldly dissonant. Undaunted, the composer recycled the music into the orchestral *Scythian Suite* which, like the *Rite*, became a *succès de scandale* (“success in scandal”). After the October 1917 revolution as civil war disrupted life in Russia, Prokofiev escaped to the United States. Two years later he moved to Paris and reconnected with Diaghilev. In France he married the soprano Carolina (Lina) Codina, became a father, and seemed firmly established.

By 1925 Joseph Stalin controlled the new USSR. He sought propaganda gains by “reach[ing] out to first-class [Russian-born] talents who might consider relocating to the Soviet Union” [Simon Morrison, *The People’s*

Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years]. Drawn by commissions and popular acclaim, Prokofiev frequently toured the USSR. He found an esthetic concordance between Socialist Realism and his beliefs as a Christian Scientist, realized musically through a simplified approach and expressions of “cheerfulness and joyfulness.” In 1936 Prokofiev, dependent on his income from Soviet sources, agreed to settle permanently in Moscow. The move coincided with the publication of a chilling article in *Pravda*. “Muddle Instead of Music” condemned Dmitry Shostakovich and heralded a broad crackdown on artists. Naïvely, “Prokofiev



Rudolf Nureyev and Margot Fonteyn as Romeo and Juliet

allowed himself to believe that, with Shostakovich under a cloud, he had automatically become the preeminent Soviet composer” and “could always return to Paris” if life in Moscow failed to meet expectations [Morrison].

An important carrot for Prokofiev’s relocation was the impending production of *Romeo and Juliet*, composed in 1935 during a family summer holiday in Russia. However, increasing political oversight caused delays. Another sticking point was Prokofiev’s decision to spare the lives of the ballet’s protagonists. While this plot twist drew ridicule, Prokofiev brushed it off as pragmatic: “...in the last act Romeo arrives a minute earlier, finds Juliet alive and everything ends well. The reasons for this bit of barbarism were purely choreographic: living people can dance, the dying cannot.” When choreographers determined “the tragic ending could be expressed in dance...in due course the music for that ending was written.” The revised ballet finally was premiered in Brno, Czechoslovakia in 1938 and in the USSR in 1940. Prokofiev also published episodes from *Romeo and Juliet* as three orchestral suites. This evening the Chapel Hill Philharmonia presents four movements drawn from the first and second suites:

- “The Street Awakens” in the market square of Verona during the Italian Renaissance;
- “Arrival of the Guests” for a masked ball at the Capulet home which Romeo crashes and at which he and Juliet meet and fall instantly in love;
- the famous “Balcony Scene” in which Romeo and Juliet pledge their love to each other;
- “Dance of the Knights,” a face-off at the ball after Romeo and two Montague compatriots are unmasked by the Capulet Tybalt, Juliet’s fiery cousin.

Romeo and Juliet helped cement Prokofiev’s reputation as a composer of the highest rank. Yet, despite the success of patriotic works during World War II, his standing under Stalin’s repressive regime eroded. He lost travel privileges and his music was attacked as Formalistic, a label oft pinned on material that critics failed to understand at first hearing. He suffered from chronic high blood pressure. Ironically, his love life also became chaotic. In 1941 he abandoned Lina and his two sons to live with Mira Mendelsohn, a poet half his age. Prokofiev and Mira remained together until his death in 1953, which went virtually unnoticed because Stalin died on the same day.

Beethoven: Symphony No. 7, Allegretto

Ludwig van Beethoven, too, lived in “interesting times.” The Napoleonic Wars (1799-1815) overlapped with the central “heroic” period of his musical career. 200 years ago to the day, on 8 December 1813, the nearly deaf Beethoven conducted a charity concert at the University of Vienna to aid Austrian soldiers wounded in the recent Battle of Hanau, at which Napoleon Bonaparte broke through a trap set for his French army as it retreated from a major defeat. Johann Mälzel, an inventor of musical devices, organized the concert, from which he stood to gain valuable publicity, and assembled an all-star orchestra. The program featured two military marches played by a “Mechanical Trumpeter” devised by Mälzel’s brother Leonard. The big hit of the evening proved to be the premiere of *Wellington’s Victory* by Beethoven. This bombastic piece of battle music commemorates the defeat of Napoleon’s brother Joseph by Coalition forces under Britain’s Duke of Wellington at the Battle of Vittoria in June 1813. Mälzel originally requested the work as a showpiece for his Panharmonicum, a mechanical military band controlled by cylinders like player piano rolls. The wild applause accorded the full orchestral version at the benefit event prompted Beethoven to use it as an anchor piece in several subsequent concerts for his own gain. These kept him financially afloat after the loss of income from several of his noble patrons due to death or bankruptcy.

The audience’s enthusiasm for *Wellington’s Victory* nearly overshadowed the first performance of another Beethoven work on the December 8th program—the *Symphony No. 7 in A Major*, now ranked among his masterpieces. Beethoven began to sketch the Seventh Symphony and its companion the Eighth in late 1811 and finished them

the next year. They marked the culmination of a decade in which, beginning with the great *Symphony No. 3*, the “*Eroica*”, Beethoven transformed the scope of orchestral music. The Seventh Symphony lifts rhythm to central importance. Three of the work’s four movements drive with an energy that led his contemporary Carl Maria von Weber to consider Beethoven “quite ripe for the madhouse.” Many commentators describe the work in language similar to that of composer/author Jan Swafford (Boston Conservatory) who calls it “roaring” and “unbridled”, “...a kind of Bacchic [i.e., jovially or riotously intoxicated] trance, with dance music from beginning to end.”

The second movement is a theme and variations set in A minor. The first night audience demanded an encore, and it remains a favorite today. The movement evokes a mood distinct from the Bacchic dance – contemplative, melancholy, and even funereal in the hands of conductors who opt for a slower tempo than *Allegretto* (“a little lively”). The lower strings introduce a theme built on repetitive five-note fragments (Taah-Ta-Ta-Taah-Taah), which is taken up by the rest of the orchestra. “The idea is a process of intensification, adding layer upon layer to the inexorably marching chords. For contrast comes a sweet, harmonically stable section in A major. Rondo-like, the opening theme returns twice, the last time serving as coda” [Swafford]. Some analysts note the similarity of the movement’s rhythmic foundation to the dactylic hexameter of classical epic poetry. Conductor Jeffrey Kahane suggests that the *Allegretto* was inspired by Homer’s *Odyssey*, one of Beethoven’s favorite books.

Others have pondered whether the Seventh Symphony had another inspiration, at least subconsciously, in Beethoven’s most profound but still mysterious romantic love. Although he expressed desire for a family life, all of his documented marriage proposals were rejected. However, among papers found in Beethoven’s desk after his death in 1827 were three searing love letters, either never posted, or recovered from the recipient. Dated Monday and Tuesday, July 6 and 7, year unspecified, they were addressed to an unnamed woman with whom Beethoven had recently met. He called her his “Immortal Beloved” and declared “Much as you love me – I love you more...”

Who was the Juliet to Beethoven’s Romeo? Biographies, novels, and a recent film have advocated multiple candidates, some based on mere conjecture, others on forged evidence. Careful analysis by biographer Maynard Solomon showed that the letters were written in 1812, thus three months after the Seventh Symphony’s completion. Circumstance evidently placed the Immortal Beloved beyond Beethoven’s reach: “can you change the fact that you are not wholly mine, I not wholly thine.” Yet he exhorted her to “remain my true, my only treasure, my all as I am yours.” Solomon’s candidate Beloved is Antonie Brentano, a married woman with an 11-year-old daughter. Another school, including German author John Klapproth, points instead to a Hungarian Countess, Josephine von Brunsvik, a piano pupil of Beethoven’s to whom he addressed 15 known love letters. In 1812 Josephine was estranged from her second husband, Baron Christoph von Stackelberg. They fought for custody of four children by Josephine’s first husband, an older nobleman to whom she had been given in an arranged marriage and who died suddenly of pneumonia. Moreover, Stackelberg had ruined their finances through a failed real estate transaction. Although the embattled couple almost certainly had ceased relations, Josephine gave birth to a daughter, Minona, nine months after the date of the Immortal Beloved letters. Klapproth concludes that Beethoven likely fathered this child.



Brahms: Symphony No. 2

Bid us sigh on from day to day,
And wish and wish the soul away,
Till youth and genial years are flown,
And all the life of life is gone.

—Watt, Samuel Beckett

Intimidated by expectations that he live up to a revered predecessor, Johannes Brahms once complained, “You have no idea of how it feels to hear behind you the tramp of a giant like Beethoven.” After 15 years of labor, Brahms finally finished his First Symphony when he was 43-years-old, the age by which Beethoven already had completed his Eighth. The logjam broken, Brahms began a new symphony the next year, 1877, and finished it in four months. He did much of the work during a lakeside summer holiday at Pörttschach, Austria, where he swam daily in sight of snowy alpine peaks and found that “The melodies fly so thick...that you have to be careful not to step on one.” The *Symphony No. 2*, with all four movements in major keys and indeed filled with lush melodies, exerted immediate appeal and drew inevitable comparisons with Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony* (No. 6).

Brahms, however, was only partially jesting when he wrote to his publisher, Fritz Simrock, “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.” In his biography of Brahms, Jan Swafford notes that the symphony’s tranquility is deceptive. For example, while “the first [movement] is in three-quarter time like a waltz, beginning with lilting themes that [Viennese “Waltz King”] Johann Strauss might have claimed...In fact, anyone trying to waltz to this music will fall on his face.” Swafford continues, “As its rhythmic ambiguities suggest, the cheery pastoral surface of the Second Symphony, the source of its instant and abiding popularity, masks a darker undercurrent.”

Another signal of the symphony’s gloomier side lies in its harmonic structure and orchestration. In the first movement Brahms employs trombones, historically used in sacred chorales, in a novel way. “Here there is no sacred tone at all. Their quiet, ambiguous dissonance...appears like a chilly shadow falling across a summer meadow. The intensity near the end of the development, almost shocking in context, has much to do with the braying of trombones and tubas in their low registers” [Swafford].

The slow second movement, a long *Adagio*, begins with a falling theme in the cellos, complemented by a rising accompaniment in the bassoons. Again, ambiguities in meter and tonality contribute to “a certain melancholy vein here, which deepens with the appearance of the hymnlike second theme” [musicologist Richard Freed].

The audience at the Second Symphony’s premiere by the Vienna Philharmonic on December 30, 1877 demanded an encore of the ingratiating third movement. The oboe begins with a theme in the rhythm of a *ländler*, an Austrian folk dance that was a precursor of the waltz. Despite the “almost naïve charm and intimacy” [Freed] of this intermezzo, Brahms crafts it with sophisticated rhythmical transformations.

To some hearers the symphony’s energetic final movement, a spirited dance, builds to “a blazing fanfare, ending...on a note of sheer exhilaration...that...simply abounds in joy” [Freed]. The work “ends with a spine-tingling D major chord in trombones” so that these “harbingers of darkness in the first movement are redeemed in the last, proclaiming the triumph of joy...” [Swafford]. Yet, Brahms scholar Reinhold Brinkmann



Johannes Brahms



Clara Schumann

is not convinced. To his ears “the gaiety becomes almost violently brilliant and seems stage-managed.” Brahms himself, responding to a correspondent who caught the symphony’s darker hints, confessed that he could never fully escape the awareness “that black wings are constantly flapping above us”, and that he struggled to answer the fundamental question of existence, “Why?”

To Clara Schumann, his closest confidante, Brahms described the Second Symphony as “elegiac in character,” that is, containing sorrow for something now past. Citing Brinkmann’s book *Late Idyll*, Swafford explains, “He means it as an idyll longed for when the idyllic is no longer possible.” Perhaps this sense of loss grew out of the love between Brahms and Clara, 14 years his senior. (Historians still debate whether it was ever fully consummated.) The two met when Brahms was 20-years-old, slim, blond-haired, and beardless, a self-styled “Johannes Kreisler” modeled on a fictional composer created by the archetypal romantic E. T. A. Hoffmann. Clara was then married to Robert Schumann, an early champion of Brahms’s music. When Robert fell mad and languished in an asylum, Brahms lived in the Schumann home, “consoling [Clara], helping with the children, and going nearly out of his mind with yearning” [Swafford]. Upon Robert’s death in 1856, Clara and Brahms seemed free to declare their passion openly and marry. Almost inexplicably, Brahms rejected the woman he most loved and esteemed, and returned alone to his family home in Hamburg.

Swafford attributes Brahms’s lifelong emotional difficulties with Clara, and every other woman he admired, to abuse suffered as an adolescent. To make money, young Johannes’s father sent him to play piano in Hamburg’s waterfront *Amierlokale*, “stimulation pubs”, frequented by a rough crowd of sailors and prostitutes. Swafford claims “the effects of the *Lokale*...were indelible. For the rest of his life, with friends or in his cups, Brahms would recall those nights as dark and shameful...He felt intimacy as a threat, female sexuality as a threat.” In consequence even in the sunny Second Symphony, “The chaos of emotion [had to be] shackled and subdued by a relentless sense of form and discipline: that is Brahms’s art in a nutshell. Likewise, his life. And the most familiar and beloved note in his art is the note of yearning.”

— Program notes by Mark E. Furth, PhD ©2013

Evan Feldman is Assistant Professor of Music at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he conducts the Wind Ensemble and Symphony Band and teaches courses in conducting and music education. He also directs the Triangle Wind Ensemble, Greensboro Concert Band, and MYCO Youth Orchestra. Previously he was Director of Bands at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Dr. Feldman earned the Doctor of Musical Arts in Conducting from the Eastman School of Music, where served as an assistant conductor for the Wind Ensemble and the Wind Orchestra. He has published numerous musical arrangements and scholarly works, and his recently published college textbook *Instrumental Music Education* has been adopted throughout the country.



Guest conductor Dr. Evan Feldman

