Chicago Symphony Orchestra
Riccardo Muti Zell Music Director
Yo-Yo Ma Judson and Joyce Green Creative Consultant

Thursday, December 15, 2016, at 8:00
Friday, December 16, 2016, at 1:30
Saturday, December 17, 2016, at 8:00
Sunday, December 18, 2016, at 3:00

Michael Tilson Thomas Conductor
Gautier Capuçon Cello

Stravinsky
Scènes de ballet

Saint-Saëns
Cello Concerto No. 1 in A Minor, Op. 33
Allegro non troppo—
Allegretto con moto—
Allegro non troppo

Gautier Capuçon

INTERMISSION

Prokofiev
Suite from Romeo and Juliet
Introduction to Act 1
Romeo
The Street Awakens
The Quarrel
The Fight
The Duke’s Command
Interlude
The Nurse
The Young Juliet
Folk Dance
Dance of the Knights
Balcony Scene
Mercutio
The Duel
Romeo Decides to Avenge Mercutio
The Death of Tybalt

The appearance of Maestro Michael Tilson Thomas is made possible by the Juli Plant Grainger Fund for Artistic Excellence.

Thursday evening’s concert is generously sponsored by the Waddell Family.

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Igor Stravinsky
Born June 17, 1882; Oranienbaum, Russia
Died April 6, 1971; New York City

Scènes de ballet

In 1944, Billy Rose, the American showman who married Fanny Brice (in the post-Funny Girl phase), produced the Broadway musical Carmen Jones (based on Bizet’s opera), and wrote the lyrics for “It's Only a Paper Moon,” decided to try his hand at high culture by staging a review called The Seven Lively Arts. He asked Salvador Dalí to create seven paintings (a “surrealist conception” of the seven subjects) to hang in the lounge of the Ziegfeld Theatre, which Rose had recently purchased and remodeled, during the run of the show (the paintings were destroyed in a fire at Rose’s Mount Kisco home in 1956). And he paid Igor Stravinsky $5,000 to write the music for a fifteen-minute ballet sequence.

Rose’s original idea was to insert an abridged version of the ballet Giselle into the show, featuring Anton Dolin and Alicia Markova, who had been dancing the role at the Met. When Markova demurred, Rose commissioned some music from Kurt Weill, but he declined. It was then that Rose turned to Stravinsky, asking for fifteen minutes “after” Giselle, a rather unusual request to which Stravinsky agreed at once. In June, Dolin visited Stravinsky’s Los Angeles home, with the scores of Giselle and Swan Lake in his arms. Together they concocted a scenario very loosely based on act 2 of Giselle, which they called L’étoile (the star), until Stravinsky decided he wanted a title more suitable for the concert hall, where he assumed this music would one day retire. Stravinsky wrote the score for his Scènes de ballet over the summer of 1944, taking time out to conduct Petrushka at the Hollywood Bowl.

As Stravinsky composed, he turned the score over, page by page, to his assistant (and later Michael Tilson Thomas’s teacher) Ingolf Dahl, to arrange it for piano. Rose was delighted the first time he heard Stravinsky’s music, in Dahl’s piano reduction, but at the Philadelphia preview he was taken aback by the sound of the full orchestral score, full of biting sonorities and bristling textures. He sent Stravinsky a telegram, saying that his music had been a “great success,” but that it would be a sensational success if he would authorize Robert Russell Bennett, “who orchestrates even the works of Cole Porter,” to retouch the score. Stravinsky wrote back at once: “Satisfied with great success.”

Stravinsky’s score follows a traditional sequence of dances centering around a grand pas de deux, with a winning trumpet solo that has been criticized as vulgar or
sentimental but is, in fact, lovely. There are many wonderful, characteristic Stravinsky touches throughout the score: the four opening chords spaced so unpredictably that we hang on each one waiting to see what will happen next, or the theme that follows played by four solo violas. Each of the dances is a delectable miniature, scored with great finesse and often for unexpected combinations of instruments. As always with Stravinsky, there is nothing slapdash, nothing ill-considered—even in music designed for a popular review. The Apotheose (Stravinsky envisioned “a stage full of groups twirling and mounting delirando”) is transcendent: it shimmers and builds as it moves toward a conclusion of irresistible grandeur. The musical gestures throughout are those of dance; nowhere is the score indebted to the specifics of the original (and now forgotten) scenario. “This music,” Stravinsky said, “is patterned after the forms of the classical dance, free of any given literary or dramatic argument. The parts follow each other as in a sonata or a symphony, in contrasts or similarities.”

A postscript about The Seven Lively Arts. Rose’s review ran only briefly at the Ziegfeld Theatre and eventually lost him loads of money, despite the fact that it included songs by Cole Porter (“Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye” was the lone hit) and featured many big names, including Benny Goodman, the comedian Beatrice Lillie, the actor Bert Lahr, an orchestra conducted by Maurice Abravanel, and a chorus directed by Robert Shaw. The original playbill does not list Stravinsky, even in the fine print at the bottom of the page.

— P.H.

Camille Saint-Saëns
Born October 9, 1835; Paris, France
Died December 16, 1921; Algiers, Algeria

Cello Concerto No. 1 in A Minor, Op. 33

Saint-Saëns made his professional debut at the age of ten, playing piano concertos by Mozart and Beethoven in the Salle Pleyel in Paris. He was one of music’s astonishing prodigies—an early bloomer, a quick study, and the stuff of legend. (At his Salle Pleyel debut he offered to play from memory, as an encore, any Beethoven sonata the audience requested.) He composed his first piece when he was only three years old, and at four he played the piano part of one of Beethoven’s violin sonatas at a private concert. By thirteen, he had been admitted to the Paris Conservatory, where he was an award-winning star pupil. Hector Berlioz said of him: “He knows everything, but lacks inexperience.”

Unlike the young Mozart, Saint-Saëns was not exploited as a child; his widowed mother
saw that he was given a serious, well-rounded education. He studied Latin and read the classics; he studied mathematics and science, and he developed lifelong fascinations with astronomy and archeology. His published writings include essays and books on botany, Roman drama, and the history of the postage stamp.

Saint-Saëns’s musical interests were also wide ranging, and, at a time when “old” music was not yet fashionable, he was a great advocate of such composers as Bach, Handel, and Gluck. (He helped convert Berlioz to the Bach cause.) He also was a great defender of contemporary music, particularly that by Wagner, who lacked French champions, and of Liszt. (In 1860, he astonished Wagner by playing huge chunks of Tristan and Isolde from memory at the piano.) Eventually his sympathy for modern music waned—he was among the outraged audience members at the premiere of Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring in 1913. Although he outlived both Mahler and Debussy, he had no use for either composer’s music.

Saint-Saëns was a natural composer of concertos, for he was himself something of a showman and an exceptionally gifted performer—Berlioz called him “an absolutely shattering master pianist.” When he began this cello concerto in 1872, he already had composed three concertos for piano and two for violin—all relatively light virtuoso vehicles of indisputable charm.

This cello concerto is a work of considerable depth and seriousness. Its experimentation with traditional form owes much to the innovations of Liszt, particularly the linking of its three movements as one, and the recycling and transformation of the opening material throughout the work. (Fifteen years later, Saint-Saëns would dedicate his Organ Symphony to Liszt.) The middle movement plays the role of both slow movement and scherzo (another Lisztian idea), although nothing is as impressive as the passages that bind it at either end to the dramatic opening movement and the brilliant finale.

The soloist dominates the concerto from the first measure. Saint-Saëns takes great care to ensure that the cello line, in phrase after phrase of both virtuosic display and lyrical beauty, is never overwhelmed by the orchestra—a serious liability in writing for the combination of orchestra with such a low-lying solo instrument. After finishing the concerto, Saint-Saëns is said to have refused ever to write another one for cello, because he had found it so difficult to showcase it properly. But he loved the sound of the cello—think of the great, noble Swan in his Carnival of the Animals—and thirty years later he succumbed and wrote a second cello concerto.
During Sergei Prokofiev’s last trip to Chicago, in January 1937, he led the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in selections from his new, still-unstaged ballet, *Romeo and Juliet*. This was the composer’s fifth visit to Chicago, and he clearly felt at home: shortly after he arrived in town he sat down with a *Tribune* reporter and talked freely while eating apple pie at a downtown luncheonette. He was staying in the same hotel room where he had lived for several months during his Chicago visit in 1921, when he presided over preparations for the world premiere of his opera *The Love for Three Oranges*. He told the *Tribune* that his *Romeo and Juliet* featured the kind of “new melodic line” that he thought would prove to be the salvation of modern music—one, he said, that would have immediate appeal yet sound like nothing written before. “Of all the moderns,” the *Herald Examiner* critic wrote after hearing *Romeo and Juliet* later in the week, “this tall and boyish Russian has the most definite gift of melody, the most authentic contrapuntal technic [sic], and displays the subtlest and most imaginative use of dissonance.”

Chicago was the first U.S. city to hear music from *Romeo and Juliet* (following recent performances in Moscow and Paris), and not for the only time in Prokofiev’s career, orchestral excerpts were premiered before the ballet itself had been staged. The idea for a ballet version of the Shakespeare play came from the director Sergei Radlov, who was a friend of Prokofiev and had mounted the first Russian production of *The Love for Three Oranges*. He and Prokofiev worked together to flesh out a scenario early in 1935, and the composer began to write the music that summer. But the Kirov Ballet, which had commissioned the work, unexpectedly backed out, and the Bolshoi Theatre took over the project. There were further problems with the score itself, including Prokofiev’s initial insistence on a happy ending—“Living people can dance,” he later wrote in defense of the decision, “but the
dead cannot dance lying down.” The end was ultimately changed to match Shakespeare’s, but then the Bolshoi staff pronounced Prokofiev’s music “unsuitable to dance” and dropped out as well. The premiere of *Romeo and Juliet* eventually was given in Brno, Czechoslovakia, without Prokofiev’s participation (he didn’t attend the opening in December 1938) and the ballet wasn’t staged in Russia until January 1940. In the meantime, Prokofiev made two orchestral suites of seven excerpts each, and it was the first of these that he conducted in Chicago. He added a third suite of six numbers in 1946. (At this week’s concerts, the selections Michael Tilson Thomas conducts are taken largely from the complete ballet score rather than the suites.)

Although no other play by Shakespeare has inspired as many musical treatments as *Romeo and Juliet*, including more than twenty operas (Gounod’s, which the teenage Prokofiev saw in Saint Petersburg, is the most enduring), Prokofiev’s is the first large-scale ballet. It’s one of his most important works, merging the primitive style of his radical earlier music, a newfound classicism, and the sumptuous lyricism of which he was so proud.

The selections performed at this concert emphasize the drama and narrative power of the ballet; they include some of the most famous music in the score, but also much that we rarely get to hear (and that Prokofiev did not include in his popular suites). We begin with the Introduction to the first act, with which Prokofiev sets the scene on the streets of Verona like a master cinematographer, sensitive to the power of mood and lighting. From there, we cover the entire drama, not in the sequence of the original ballet, but focusing on the central moments in Shakespeare’s tale. Separately, we meet the young Romeo and Juliet, innocent teenagers, capricious and playful, and eager for romance. We are thrust into the heart of the family quarrel and the hair-raising fight that follows. There is music of delicacy (the central episode in the portrait of young Juliet, with its lovely flute solo) and music foreshadowing the inevitable tragedy to come (the opening chords of the Duke’s Command, which seem to grow in intensity to the breaking point). There is music of menace (the famous marching theme in the Dance of the Knights) and violence (in comments written in his score, Prokofiev characterized the high-bravado duel between Tybalt and Mercutio: “they look at each other like two fighting bulls; blood is boiling”). And at the heart of Prokofiev’s musical drama is the great, magically scored balcony scene—passionate, richly lyrical night music, and one of the most rapturous moments in all ballet.

**Phillip Huscher has been the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra since 1987.**