

Concert for Chicago

Sunday, September 19, 2010, at 5:30 p.m.
Jay Pritzker Pavilion, Millennium Park

Chicago Symphony Orchestra

Riccardo Muti, Conductor

Giuseppe Verdi

Overture to *La forza del destino*

Franz Liszt

Les préludes, Symphonic Poem No. 3

Intermission

Piotr Tchaikovsky

Romeo and Juliet

Ottorino Respighi

Pines of Rome

PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

Giuseppe Verdi

Born October 9, 1813, Roncole, near Busseto, Italy.

Died January 27, 1901, Milan, Italy.

Overture to *La forza del destino*

Verdi composed *La forza del destino* in 1861 and 1862; the first performance was given in Saint Petersburg on November 10, 1862. The overture was composed when Verdi revised the opera in 1869. The overture calls for an orchestra consisting of flute and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, percussion, two harps, and strings. Performance time is approximately eight minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra first performed Verdi's Overture to *La forza del destino* at the Ravinia Festival on July 20, 1943, with Efrem Kurtz conducting.

Early in his career, Verdi became the most talked about composer in Italy. By the end of his long and astonishingly productive life, he was probably the most beloved composer in the world. His rise was swift—after a late start and the failure of his first two operas—and relatively free from major setbacks (although he never understood why his beloved *Macbeth* didn't catch on). And the range of his life could not have been greater—from his childhood in a dirt-floored house in Roncole (more of a crossroads than a village) to a retirement marked by the kind of prestige, wealth, and international fame few composers ever enjoy.

Of his more than two dozen operas, from *Oberto* to *Falstaff*—spanning fifty-four years and including some of the most beloved works ever staged—none has a more rousing or popular overture than *La forza del destino*. When it was first performed in 1862, the opera opened with a modest and conventional prelude,

a device that had often served Verdi well in the past. *La forza del destino*, however, is one of a handful of operas that Verdi later extensively reworked, and when he revised the score in 1869, he replaced the prelude with this magnificent full-scale overture. It offers a preview of the opera's highlights, from the stirring "destiny" motive to Leonora's soaring prayer, but it is shaped and paced with such skill and ingenuity that it not only sharpens our appetite for the complete opera, it stands perfectly on its own in the concert hall.

Franz Liszt

Born October 22, 1811, Raiding, Hungary.

Died July 31, 1886, Bayreuth, Bavaria.

***Les préludes*, Symphonic Poem No. 3, after Lamartine**

Liszt composed this music between 1849 and 1855. The first performance was given on February 23, 1854, in Weimar. The score calls for piccolo and three flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, harp, bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, and strings. Performance time is approximately sixteen minutes.

The Chicago Symphony performed *Les préludes* its first season, on January 29 and 30, 1892, under Theodore Thomas.

On May 5, 1856, Liszt sent the newly published scores of six of his symphonic poems, including *Les préludes*, to Richard Wagner. In return, Wagner sent off the original scores to *Das Rheingold* and *Die Walküre*, followed by a letter full of kind words for Liszt's newest efforts. The two composers had been unusually close for many years, each sometimes virtually alone in appreciating what the other was up to, although in the next decade, when Wagner fathered two illegitimate children with Liszt's daughter Cosima, the relationship was severely strained. But in 1856—Wagner never suspecting that he would one day have to accept Liszt as his father-in-law—they were united in pushing music toward a new frontier. Scholars and musicians have argued over their comparative success ever since, and although it is Wagner, largely by virtue of an advanced case of self-promotion and a very modern understanding of public relations, who is generally seen as the greater revolutionary, there are those who would agree with the verdict of Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein, who knew them both: "[Liszt] has hurled his lance much further into the future than Wagner."

In November of 1856 Liszt and Wagner took part in a concert in Saint Gallen, with Wagner conducting the *Eroica* Symphony and Liszt his own *Orpheus* and *Les préludes*. In 1856, *Les préludes* was new music: it had been finished and first performed only two years before in Weimar. But it was also new in the more important sense of modern, fresh, and novel. That is sometimes hard to accept today, for *Les préludes* is arguably Liszt's best-known composition—certainly his most played orchestral work; and because of its fame and familiarity, and all the music that was later conceived in its image, we fail to realize its novelty.

There are a number of common misconceptions about Liszt's symphonic poems. Liszt did invent the name—the term *sinfonische Dichtung* (symphonic poem) was used for the first time in 1854—to describe music that did not strictly follow any of the classical forms, and that was, in some way, related to literary or pictorial works. But he did not invent the musical conception, which is a logical outgrowth of the single-movement dramatic overtures of Beethoven, rather than multi-movement program symphonies like Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. There are precedents as well for Liszt's important experiments with one-movement forms, and for his use of thematic transformation—often in place of a Beethovenian development of material. Certainly Schubert's *Wanderer* Fantasy, which Liszt knew well, played spectacularly, and later arranged for piano and orchestra, anticipates much that is essential to Liszt's best work.

The novelty, if that is the right word, of Liszt's symphonic poems is that, like Berlioz in his *Symphonie fantastique*, he took ideas that were in the air and made something unimagined, distinctive, successful, and highly influential. Without *Les préludes* and the rest of the Liszt canon, Smetana's *Ma vlásta*, Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Strauss's *Death and Transfiguration* are unthinkable.

Perhaps the greatest confusion about Liszt's works has to do with the relationship between the music and the program, particularly the question of which came first. In most cases it was the music. *Les préludes* had a previous life as an overture to an unpublished choral work, *Les quatre éléments* (The four elements), and Lamartine's poem was only unearthed when Liszt decided to make something of his overture and needed a title and general game plan to accompany it. All the musical themes in *Les préludes* came from the four pieces of the choral work, and they have more to do with earth and water than with Lamartine's war and peace. Still, Lamartine's title has served very nicely over the years, and as long as we do not try to read too much into Liszt's music, neither Liszt nor Lamartine suffers.

The music is conceived in three large paragraphs with a brief introduction. The first paragraph contains most of the material for the work, including an important, flowing melody for cellos and second violins; the second begins tempestuously but dissolves into a genial, pastoral mood (and introduces a new theme); the final section is a triumphant reworking (marked *marziale*) of the first. The whole is tightly knit and wisely paced, and Liszt's trademark transformation of themes is particularly effective.

Piotr Tchaikovsky

Born May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Viatka, Russia.

Died November 6, 1893, Saint Petersburg, Russia.

***Romeo and Juliet*, Fantasy-Overture after Shakespeare**

Tchaikovsky composed *Romeo and Juliet* between October 7 and November 27, 1869. The first performance was given on March 16, 1870, in Moscow. The composer revised the score in 1870 and again in 1880; the final version, completed on September 10, 1880, has become the standard one. The score calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, bass drum, cymbals, harp, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-one minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* were given at the Auditorium Theatre on February 3 and 4, 1893, with Theodore Thomas conducting.

No other play by Shakespeare has inspired as many composers as *Romeo and Juliet*. Throughout the romantic era in particular, the drama held an enormous—and sometimes nearly fatal—attraction. After Berlioz saw *Romeo and Juliet* in a Paris theater and fell desperately in love with Harriet Smithson, who played Juliet, he announced his intention to marry the actress and to write a dramatic symphony (now known as the *Symphonie fantastique*) based on the play—and did both within a decade. The marriage was a mistake, however, and they later separated, but the symphony is one of his greatest works.

More than twenty operas have been written on *Romeo and Juliet*, including Bellini's *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, with a mezzo-soprano as Romeo (in the tradition of trouser roles), and Gounod's enduring treatment, with the ending rewritten so that the lovers die at the same moment, singing in unison. Bernstein's urban *West Side Story* suggests that the fascination with this subject hasn't waned in our own time. And Prokofiev's 1940 ballet is now recognized as a twentieth-century classic, although the composer originally wrote a happy ending because he couldn't imagine how dying lovers could dance. But none of these works has surpassed the popularity of Tchaikovsky's fantasy-overture.

The Russian composer Mily Balakirev apparently first suggested the play to Tchaikovsky as early as the summer of 1869. He continued to push the subject and, when Tchaikovsky wavered, he prodded him. In a letter dated October 6, 1869, he offered literary observations, suggested general guidelines for treating the subject, and even dictated four measures of music to open the work. Before Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* was finished (and it was another ten years before it reached its final form), Balakirev had approved and rejected a number of themes, recommended a new introduction in the style of a Lisztian chorale, and presented his preferred tonal scheme, based on a fondness for keys with five flats or two sharps.

Surprisingly, Tchaikovsky found his own voice with this work; *Romeo and Juliet*, a "Fantasy-Overture after Shakespeare," is his first masterpiece. The original version, composed in just six weeks, was performed in March 1870, with Nicolai Rubinstein conducting. A new version, completed that summer, incorporated Balakirev's idea of a slow chorale at the beginning. It was played in Saint Petersburg in early 1872. Although Tchaikovsky and Balakirev had a falling out that year, Tchaikovsky continued to turn to Shakespeare for inspiration: in 1873 he fashioned a symphonic fantasy from *The Tempest* and late in 1876 he complained of losing sleep over *Othello*, which he was determined to turn into an opera. He dropped the project early in the new year—two years before Verdi and Boito first conceived their *Otello*. (*Hamlet* was the last Shakespearean subject to interest Tchaikovsky: he composed a fantasy-overture on it in 1888 and three years later contributed incidental music to a staging of the play in Saint Petersburg.)

In 1878, while he was recuperating from his failed marriage at his brother Modest's house, Tchaikovsky turned to *Romeo and Juliet* and was struck by its potential as a great operatic subject. (One night that May, when Modest and Sasha went to the theater to see *Romeo and Juliet*, Tchaikovsky stayed home, put his nieces and nephews to bed, and then read the Shakespeare play for himself.) "Of course I'll compose *Romeo and Juliet*," he wrote to Modest from Brailov in June, excited by the prospect of writing a new opera. "It will be my most monumental work. It now seems to me absurd that I couldn't see earlier that I was predestined, as it were, to set this drama to music." But instead of writing an opera, Tchaikovsky put the finishing touches on the fantasy-overture two years later. (It's this last version that is now regularly played.) The idea of composing the opera cropped up in 1881 and again in 1893, and on one of those occasions he sketched a duet for the lovers based on material from the fantasy-overture. But he never orchestrated it and ultimately gave up on the project, perhaps realizing how difficult it would be to surpass his orchestral work on the same subject.

Seldom in Tchaikovsky's music are form and content as well matched as in *Romeo and Juliet*. The contrast between family strife and the lovers' passion ideally lends itself to sonata form, with two dramatically contrasted themes; the conflict assures a fierce and combative development section. Tchaikovsky begins as Balakirev recommended, with solemn and fateful chords that suggest the calm, knowing voice of Friar Lawrence. The street music is noisy and action-packed. The famous love theme begins innocently in the English horn and violas; it was one of Tchaikovsky's boldest moves to save the big statement of this great melody, fully orchestrated and greatly extended—the way most listeners remember it—for much later, at the climax of the recapitulation. The lovers' music returns once again in the coda, signaled by the timpani's dying heartbeat, but there it sounds cold and lifeless.

Ottorino Respighi

Born July 9, 1879, Bologna, Italy.

Died April 18, 1936, Rome, Italy.

Pines of Rome

Respighi composed *Pines of Rome* in 1924 and it was first performed on December 14 of that year in Rome. The score calls for three flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, offstage brass, timpani, cymbals, triangle, tambourine, rattle, bass drum, tam-tam, bells, harp, celesta, a recorded nightingale, piano, organ, and strings. Performance time is approximately twenty-six minutes.

The Chicago Symphony's first subscription concert performances of Respighi's *Pines of Rome* were given at Orchestra Hall on January 29 and 30, 1926, with the composer conducting.

Like Richard Strauss and Igor Stravinsky, Ottorino Respighi was one of the many prominent composer-conductors who appeared with the Chicago Symphony during the early years of the twentieth century. And like Rachmaninov and Prokofiev, who also visited our orchestra, Respighi was a first-rate pianist. It was in the triple-threat role of composer-conductor-pianist that he first came to Chicago, in January 1926, to play his Concerto in the Mixolydian Mode and to introduce the symphonic poem *Pines of Rome*, a sequel of sorts to his already famous *Fountains of Rome*.

Although he was born in Bologna and studied in Saint Petersburg (with Rimsky-Korsakov) and in Berlin (with Max Bruch), it was Rome that became Respighi's most successful musical subject soon after he settled there in 1913. (Respighi spent the rest of his life in Rome, and he taught at the Saint Cecilia Academy for many years; his longest absences were his two North American tours, both of which brought him to Chicago.)

Several days before Respighi made his Chicago debut in 1926, *Pines of Rome* had received its American premiere in a spectacular performance in Carnegie Hall, under Arturo Toscanini. (The composer's wife Elsa always remembered the "delirious" applause that greeted the work.) The symphonic poem, with its Technicolor orchestration, lush pictorial effects, and clever novelties (it calls for a recording of bird calls at the end of the third section) was overwhelming. The composer himself conducted the work in Philadelphia, Washington, Cleveland, and Baltimore before coming to Chicago (and then in Cincinnati on his way home to Rome). *Pines of Rome* quickly became his signature piece and that rarest of works—a sequel that outdoes the original in brilliance and popularity. Unlike Ravel, who was embarrassed by the hit status of his *Boléro*, Respighi quite enjoyed the success of his most famous creation—he even named his country villa The Pines.

The composer's own guide to the score follows.

Ottorino Respighi on *Pines of Rome*

The Pines of the Villa Borghese. Children are at play in the pine groves of Villa Borghese. They dance round in circles; they play at soldiers, marching and fighting; they are wrought up by their own cries like swallows at evening; they rush about. Suddenly the scene changes.

Pines near a Catacomb. We see the shades of pine trees fringing the entrance to a catacomb. From the depth rises the sound of mournful psalms, floating through the air like a solemn hymn, and gradually and mysteriously dispersing.

The Pines of the Janiculum. A shudder runs through the air: the pine trees of the Janiculum stand distinctly outlined in the clear light of a full moon. A nightingale sings.

The Pines of the Appian Way. Misty dawn on the Appian Way: solitary pine trees guarding the magic landscape; the muffled, ceaseless rhythm of unending footsteps. The poet has a fantastic vision of bygone glories: trumpets sound, and, in the brilliance of the newly risen sun, a consular army bursts forth towards the Sacred Way, mounting in triumph to the Capitol.

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

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