

Love is in the Air

Saturday, February 9th, 2019

Perhaps no single story has inspired more musical interpretations than the story of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers, Romeo and Juliet. There are countless operas by Gounod, Bellini and Delius, symphonic rhapsodies by Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, and Kabalevsky, jazz tunes by Duke Ellington and Peggy Lee, and dozens of popular songs by artists ranging from Bruce Springsteen to Taylor Swift. Tonight's program features selections from two of the most famous adaptations of the story: Prokofiev's 1938 ballet and the 1957 musical *West Side Story*.

The story of Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* is nearly as tumultuous and tragic as the story of the ill-fated lovers themselves. Prokofiev had fled his native Russia following the Bolshevik Revolutions of 1917 and lived in San Francisco, New York, and Paris at various points during the 1920s. During the early 1930s, Prokofiev began to grow homesick and reached out to several friends who were still living and working in the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union had robust and well-funded communities of composers in both Moscow and Leningrad (St. Petersburg). However, at the exact moment that Prokofiev finally decided to return to his home country, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin initiated a severe crackdown on artistic production throughout the country. His ballet score to *Romeo and Juliet* was slated to premiere at the Mariinsky Theatre and act as an announcement of his return to the Soviet art world. However, in the months leading up to the premiere, the theatre had a rash of resignations and terminations connected to the broader upheaval of Stalin's cultural revolution. The three "concert suites" consisting of excerpted music from the ballet score—selections from which are included on tonight's program—were developed in desperation during these tense years when Prokofiev wasn't sure that his music would ever be heard. Prokofiev sent copies of the suites to friends in Europe and the United States where they received near immediate performances and acclaim. Such was the appetite for the full ballet score, that a premiere for a shortened version of the ballet was arranged in 1938 in Czechoslovakia, but Prokofiev was ultimately unable to attend the performance due to Soviet travel restrictions. Inside the Soviet Union, the piece lingered for nearly five years after its completion before finally being premiered in a substantially-revised form in Leningrad in January 1940.

Sergei Rachmaninoff's early life and career followed a similar path to his Russian compatriot Prokofiev. He was trained at the turn of the 20th century in the world-renowned Russian conservatory system and made his name travelling between the artistic elites of Moscow, St. Petersburg, Paris, and New York City. After the Revolution, Rachmaninoff and his family fled to the United States. However, unlike Prokofiev, Rachmaninoff never returned to the Soviet Union. In fact, Rachmaninoff was such a public critic of Soviet policy that his music was actually banned inside the country for several years during the same early 1930s crackdowns that foiled the premiere of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*. Rachmaninoff's *Piano Concerto No. 2* was

written well before all of this, however—receiving its premiere with the composer at the keyboard in the fall of 1901. This concerto remains one of Rachmaninoff's most enduring compositions and represents both a personal and artistic triumph for the composer. Following a negative reception for his first symphony and a broken engagement just a year later, Rachmaninoff fell into a multi-year depression that severely impacted his productivity. It was only through a comprehensive course of physical and psychological treatment from a family friend and physician Dr. Nikolai Dahl that Rachmaninoff began to recover and regain his desire to compose. This concerto is the first piece he completed after his treatment and is lovingly dedicated to Dahl. Like so much of Rachmaninoff's music, *Piano Concerto No. 2* strikes a balance between lush romanticism, lyrical melodies, and a fiercely technical approach to the piano. From the dramatic opening chords of the first movement, it is tempting to imagine the maestro himself seated at the keyboard and triumphantly announcing his return after several years in the wilderness.