



# TCHAIKOVSKY

## Romeo and Juliet

### *Fantasy Overture*

**Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (May 7, 1840 – November 6, 1893) was a Russian composer of the Romantic era. His wide-ranging output includes symphonies, operas, ballets, instrumental, chamber music and songs. He wrote some of the most popular concert and theatrical music in the classical repertoire, including the ballets *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *The Nutcracker*, the *1812 Overture*, his First Piano Concerto, his last three numbered symphonies, and the opera *Eugene Onegin*. Born into a middle-class family, Tchaikovsky was educated for a career as a civil servant, despite his obvious musical precocity. He pursued a musical career against the wishes of his family, entering the Saint Petersburg Conservatory in 1862 and graduating in 1865. This formal, Western-oriented training set him apart from the contemporary nationalistic movement embodied by the influential group of young Russian composers known as The Five, with whom Tchaikovsky's professional relationship was mixed. Although he enjoyed many popular successes, Tchaikovsky was never emotionally secure, and his life was punctuated by personal crises and periods of depression. Contributory factors were his disastrous marriage and the sudden collapse of the one enduring relationship of his adult life, his 13-year association with the wealthy widow Nadezhda von Meck. Amid private turmoil Tchaikovsky's public reputation grew; he was honoured by the Tsar, awarded a lifetime pension and lauded in the concert halls of the world. His sudden death at the age of 53 is generally ascribed to cholera, but some attribute it to suicide. Although perennially popular with concert audiences across the world, Tchaikovsky's music was often dismissed by American critics in the early and mid-20th century as being vulgar and lacking in elevated thought. By the end of the 20th century, however, Tchaikovsky's status as a significant composer was generally regarded as secure.

***Romeo and Juliet*** is an orchestral work, styled an *Overture-Fantasy*, and based on Shakespeare's play of the same name. Like Berlioz and Prokofiev, Tchaikovsky was deeply inspired by Shakespeare and wrote works based on *The Tempest* and *Hamlet* as well. Although styled an "Overture-Fantasy" by the composer, the overall design is a symphonic poem in sonata form with an introduction and an epilogue. The work is based on three main strands of the Shakespeare story. The first strand, written in F-sharp minor, following Mily Balakirev's suggestion, is the introduction representing the saintly Friar Laurence. Here there is a flavour of Russian Orthodoxy, but also a foreboding of doom from the lower strings. The Friar Laurence theme is heard in F minor, with plucked strings, before ending up in E minor. The introduction is chorale-like. Eventually a single B minor chord with a D natural in the bass passed back and forth between strings and woodwinds grows into the second strand in B minor, the agitated theme of the warring Capulets and Montagues, including a reference to the sword fight, depicted by crashing cymbals. The action suddenly slows, the key changing from B minor to D-flat (as suggested by Balakirev) and we hear the opening bars of the "love theme", the third strand, passionate and yearning in character but always with an underlying current of anxiety. The love theme signifies the couple first meeting and the scene at Juliet's balcony. The English horn represents Romeo, while the flutes represent Juliet. Then the battling strand returns, this time with more intensity and build-up, with the Friar Laurence theme heard with agitation. The strings enter with a lush, hovering melody over which the flute and oboe eventually soar with the love theme once again, this time loud and in D major, signaling the development section and their consummated marriage, and finally heard in E major, where the crash cymbals signal the suicide of the two lovers. A final battle theme is played, then a soft, slow dirge in B major ensues, with timpani playing a repeated triplet pattern, and tuba holding a B natural for 16 bars. The woodwinds play a sweet homage to the lovers, and a final allusion to the love theme brings in the climax, beginning with a huge crescendo roll on the timpani, followed by homophonic shouts of a B major chord in the entire orchestra before the final bar, with full orchestra belting out a powerful B natural to close the overture.