

Masterworks 7 Romeo and Juliet with Fort Wayne Ballet
Fort Wayne Philharmonic

PROGRAM NOTES

L'Olimpiade. Sinfonia in C Major and C minor

Concerto for Four Violins in E minor, opus 3, no. 4

Antonio Vivaldi

(b. 1678, Venice, Italy; d. 1741, Vienna, Austria)

Almost forgotten by the world for two centuries after his death in 1741, Antonio Vivaldi suddenly soared to the top of the hit parade in the early 1950s when *The Four Seasons* began filling the grooves of the newly invented LPs. And unlike many rediscovered composers, Vivaldi wasn't loved simply for this one work. After all, he had written more than 500 concertos, dozens of operas, and an extensive catalogue of church music, leaving an almost inexhaustible mine of treasures for musicians and audiences to explore.

As scholar H.C. Robbins Landon has suggested, Vivaldi's appeal may lie partly in the fact that his music actually matches the tempo of our time. He writes of the Italian's "wiry nervous sound": a kind of nonstop energy and vivacity rooted in rhythm that was unmatched by any other Baroque composer and seems to mesh perfectly with our own driven pace.

Known as the "Red Priest" for his flame-colored hair, Vivaldi took holy orders, but never officiated at the altar. Instead, his entire career was spent as a virtuoso violinist, teacher, and composer. For some three decades, he presided as music master at Venice's L'Ospedale della Pietà, a charity school for orphaned and indigent girls, and he made its concerts one of Venice's leading cultural attractions. Superbly trained as singers and instrumentalists, the young ladies amazed Venetians and foreign visitors alike as they played the virtuoso music Vivaldi created for them.

In 1711, the publication in Amsterdam of Vivaldi's *L'estro armonico* (“The Harmonic Fancy”), a set of 12 daringly expressive concertos for various combinations of instruments, swiftly spread the composer’s fame far beyond the borders of his home city. Other composers studied and copied them as examples of a new and more exciting way of writing instrumental music; hundreds of miles away, J.S. Bach became a particular fan and transcribed some of Vivaldi’s concertos for his own use.

Vivaldi established a concerto formula of three movements in fast-slow-fast tempos, but the Concerto for Four Violins in E minor we’ll hear upends this expected sequence. Instead of a fiery *Allegro*, it opens with a relaxed ***Andante*** in the style of a stately court dance. This is gently sensuous music, whose shimmering beauty is created by the four violin layering their melodic phrases atop each other in close imitation. Next we hear a quick ***Allegro assai*** movement, which sounds more like a typical first movement. The opening *ritornello* by the whole ensemble — which will keep returning, as its Italian title suggests — has a vigorous rhythmic energy. Spinning off from it, the soloists rapidly fling their imitative phrases at each other. Beginning with a solemn ***Adagio***, the final movement is also unorthodox. Even the *Allegro* it leads to is more gracious than aggressive: a swaying three-beat dance that emphasizes the first violin over the other three.

Besides his concertos, Vivaldi was also a popular composer of operas, many of which are being revived today. Opening this concert is the Sinfonia to his *L’olimpiade*, first performed in Venice in February 1734. Set to a libretto by Pietro Metastasio, it takes place at the ancient Olympic Games in Greece, where two young men are competing for the Games’ grand prize: the hand of the beautiful Aristeia. Of course, a host of dire complications arise before this jealous competition is resolved to everyone’s satisfaction.

Functioning as the opera’s overture, the Sinfonia is in two contrasting movements. In C Major, the opening ***Allegro*** is Vivaldi at his most wired, with growling lower strings urging on the violins’ fury, which fluctuates between forte and softer echo effects. It seems a perfect portrait of young men in macho competition, both athletic and amorous. In C minor, the sly ***Andante*** describes the stealthy plotting of the young women, who succeed in resolving the situation while each winning her man.

Concerto for Two Violins in D minor, BWV 1043

Johann Sebastian Bach

(b. 1685, Eisenach, Germany; d. 1750, Leipzig, Germany)

In an era when musicians were mere servants either of the church or a princely court, Johann Sebastian Bach was an early example of a successful musical entrepreneur whose ambition and talent allowed him to jump rapidly from one post to another in the pursuit of higher earnings and greater artistic challenges. After brief stints as organist at the churches of Arnstadt and Mühlhausen, he moved on to the ducal court of Weimar where he quickly won fame as one of Germany's greatest virtuoso organists as well as a masterful composer of organ works and church cantatas. Yet ever restless for new opportunities, in 1717 he abandoned this secure niche to become composer at the much smaller princely court of Cöthen.

The move seemed doubly odd since the Cöthen court practiced the Reformed or Calvinist faith, which permitted only unaccompanied hymns in its church services. Thus, Bach would have to virtually abandon the organ. But there were positive inducements, too. Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen was a highly cultivated musician who maintained a fine orchestra and a rich program of secular music at his court. And he offered higher wages, an important concern considering Bach's rapidly expanding family (he was eventually to sire 20 children!).

At Cöthen, Bach created much of his finest secular instrumental music, including concertos for solo instruments in the manner of Vivaldi. The Baroque concerto placed far less emphasis on virtuoso solo display than would the concertos of the Classical and Romantic periods. Instead, the listener's ear is stimulated by the contrast between the orchestral passages (known as the "tutti," meaning "all") and the solo sections. In this concerto, the two violin parts are equal in importance and difficulty.

Movement one opens with a big and elaborate *tutti* with rich contrapuntal play between the orchestral string parts. Thus, the soloists present the illusion of less complexity as well as welcome airiness when they enter. The *tutti* and the soloists each have distinct themes: the orchestra's beginning with an ascending scale, the soloists' with descending scales and upward leaps.

Focusing on the soloists, the **slow movement** is one of the most sublime movements Bach ever wrote: a love duet in which the two violins curve around each other in dance-like imitative phrases. Notice the tender simplicity of the descending phrases when the two come together in euphonious duet. The poignant expressiveness of this music derives from the many stings of dissonance in the solo parts resolving into sweet consonance.

The lively **third movement** is one of Bach's most ingenious. Here the roles of soloists and orchestra are sometimes reversed so that the soloists lead the opening *tutti* and then later imitate an orchestral accompaniment with energetic chords. The opening three-note motive that launches the theme is constantly repeated by the orchestra or echoed by the second soloist. And in his 3/4 meter, Bach happily accents any beat, or portion thereof, in an infectious display of rhythmic vivacity.

Selections from *Romeo and Juliet* Ballet

Sergei Prokofiev

(b. 1891, Sontsovka, Ukraine; d. 1953, Moscow, U.S.S.R.)

As he returned to the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s after years of exile in the West, Sergei Prokofiev chose *Romeo and Juliet* as a gift to his homeland, honoring the Russian tradition of full-length story ballets such as Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* and *Sleeping Beauty*. In Paris, he had already proven his skills in creating dance music with the ballets *Pas d'acier* and *The Prodigal Son* for Sergei Diaghilev and his famous Ballets Russes. His keen dramatic sense had also been revealed in several highly effective operas, including *The Gambler*, *The Love for Three Oranges*, and *The Fiery Angel*.

With a commission from Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet in hand and the love story driving his imagination, Prokofiev wrote most of the two-hour-plus score rapidly over the summer and early fall of 1935. But when he played the music for the Bolshoi staff on October 4th, they were dismayed: Prokofiev had given his ballet a happy ending in which Juliet awakens in time to prevent Romeo's suicide! In his autobiography Prokofiev explained: "The reasons for this bit of barbarism were purely choreographic: living people can dance, the dead cannot." Convinced that

the lovers' deaths could indeed be staged effectively, he rewrote his ending to match Shakespeare's.

But more trouble arose as the ballet went into rehearsal. Bewildered by Prokofiev's frequently complicated rhythms, the dancers complained that the music was "undanceable," and the Bolshoi eventually dropped the production. But Prokofiev believed deeply in his score — a magnificent blending of his melodic gifts, sophisticated wit, and cinematic ability to paint pictures with music — and in 1936, he created two concert suites to advertise his masterpiece. Audiences fell in love with the music, and ultimately, the Leningrad's Kirov Ballet mounted a production in January 1940 that established the work as one of the jewels of the classical ballet repertoire.

While the Philharmonic will not play Prokofiev's complete score, it has chosen a large selection of numbers, including much of Act I, which enable the Fort Wayne Ballet to perform Shakespeare's immortal love story nearly in its totality. We have the opportunity to experience many of the numbers heard in the Suites, but now more vividly in their dramatic and emotional context, including: charming portraits of the carefree young lovers before tragedy has touched them; the macho swagger of the Capulet men at Juliet's birthday party; the soaring rapture of the "Balcony Scene" in a more extended version than the Suites offer us; Romeo and Tybalt's horrifying duel to the death and its consequences for Romeo; and the heartbreakingly beautiful music for "Juliet's Death" — an anguished version of the Love Theme from the "Balcony Scene" introduced high in the violins — as she awakens to discover Romeo dead and decides to join her fate to his.