

RESONATING ACROSS CENTURIES

MUSIC TO ENHANCE ROMEO & JULIET

• By Joseph and Elizabeth Kahn •

In Tudor and Stuart England there were no copyright laws. As soon as the ink dried on Shakespeare's plays, they came into the public domain to be copied, produced, translated, amended, and adapted in ways the Bard could never have imagined — sometimes in ways that would have had him turn over in his grave.

The French were among the worst offenders. Incensed that Shakespeare had violated the Aristotelian unities of place, time, and action (not to mention mixing comedy with tragedy), they at first refused to even consider producing the plays, but by the 18th century, they grudgingly bowdlerized them in translation. (Romeo and Juliet escape the clan warfare of Verona and live happily ever after in Mantua!) As late as the 20th century, Leningrad's Kirov ballet, which commissioned Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, rejected it, also demanding a happy ending, which the composer refused to provide. Only after a hugely successful premiere abroad did the Kirov relent.

Of all of Shakespeare's plays, *Romeo and Juliet* continues to have the greatest resonance across the centuries. It has been transformed into opera, ballet, symphonic tone poem, Broadway musical, and film, in each instance gaining new perspective and insight, although often losing the original text.

Music is an integral component in Shakespeare's comedies, with songs performed by "clowns" such as Feste in *Twelfth Night*, Costard in *Love's Labours Lost*, and Touchstone in *As You Like It*. While the histories and tragedies are richly populated by fools, they are not singing fools. As a tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet* has no music of its own, even at the Capulet ball where one might expect it. Nevertheless, the particularly Romantic practice of enhancing spoken drama — not just Shakespeare — with incidental music opened up all sorts of possibilities, most famously in Mendelssohn's incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

For this adaptation with the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, the North Carolina Symphony has selected a variety of pre-existing musical excerpts as incidental music, to provide atmosphere and an emotive dimension to the play, transcending period and musical style. In support of Shakespeare's drama, the orchestral selections provide a high-quality score: as entr'acte, accompaniment to the action, or background to the dialogue.

"*Romeo and Juliet* has inspired so much great music from so many of our finest composers, that we knew we would be spoilt for choice here," says NCS Music Director Grant Llewellyn. "However, we were not looking just for beautiful concert music to reflect the play, but needed to get the right balance of words and music, so as to enhance the play rather than distract from it."

Most of the music has been excerpted from works specifically relating to the play: Berlioz's symphonic poem *Roméo et Juliette*, Prokofiev's ballet, Frederick Delius' opera *A Village Romeo and Juliet*, and Dmitri Kabalevsky's incidental music. Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* and Richard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* reference other star-crossed romances. Some selections have gone "way off the beaten path," as Llewellyn says, bearing no direct relationship to the play but supplying mood and atmosphere for the action. For example, the produc-

tion employs a single leitmotif (a recurring musical idea), exclusively for Friar Lawrence: a *canzon* by Renaissance composer Giovanni Gabrieli — music that would be familiar to the Montagues and Capulets. Drastically shifting the musical style back to that of Shakespeare's era provides an air of religious gravitas to the Friar's character.

"I am confident that the strength of Shakespeare's drama will carry any combination of styles," proclaims Llewellyn. "But then, as a Brit, I would say that!"

The selections include well-known works repurposed for this production. Listeners may be surprised to hear excerpts from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* serving different functions from those in the original ballet. The Prologue, for example, which accompanies the first street fight between Montagues and Capulets in Act I, is taken from a crucial scene in the ballet's second act, in which Romeo kills Juliet's cousin, Tybalt. The Capulet ball is accompanied by the waltz from Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* (allowing for the added allusion to the composer's infatuation and stormy marriage to English Shakespearean actress Harriet Smithson). The final scene incorporates the *Liebtestod* from *Tristan und Isolde*, in which Isolde's death over Tristan's body parallels Juliet's — although the circumstances of the two tragedies are quite different.

"In Carl Forsman, we are blessed with a fantastic director who completely gets the unique marriage of words and music we are presenting. With Carl, we have tried to identify the key dramatic moments, many of which need no help from music, but others of which we felt would work well with the orchestral contribution," says Llewellyn. "This is necessarily a delicate process as we refine a fascinating new art form."

