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Richard Freed, now in his eighteenth season as program annotator for the Flint Symphony Orchestra, is a former music critic for *The New York Times* and *Saturday Review*. His credentials include service as assistant to the director of the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music, executive director of the Music Critics Association, record critic for *The Washington Star* and *The Washington Post*, and program annotator for the St. Louis Symphony, Baltimore Symphony, Houston Symphony, National Symphony (Washington, D.C.) and Philadelphia Orchestras. He has received two ASCAP-Deems Taylor Awards for his concert and record annotations, and a Grammy Award for the latter. In 2003, the President of Finland awarded him the medal of Knight First Class in the Order of the Lion of Finland.

Romeo and Juliet, Fantasy Overture

PYOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY
Born May 7, 1840, Kamsko-Votkinsk, Russia
Died November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg

It is unlikely that any other musical term has been used for as many different applications as the word "overture." Most conspicuously, in our time, that label indicates an orchestral introduction or prelude to a stage work. In Bach's time, however, an overture was a suite of dances, introduced by a more elaborate introduction, also headed "Ouvertüre," and such works might be for unaccompanied harpsichord as well as for small orchestra. The symphony itself grew out of the classic Italian opera overture, as represented in the works of Bach's youngest son, Johann Christian, and the young Mozart; indeed, Joseph Haydn's final symphonies, the dozen composed for London, were introduced there as "grand overtures." In Mendelssohn's time the term "overture" was frequently applied to a descriptive or "programmatic" orchestral work, as exemplified by this composer's famous depiction of *Fingal's Cave*, or to works that are simply work-outs (or "fantasies") on well-known tunes. Although Liszt created a new category for descriptive pieces which he called "symphonic poems" (or simply "tone poems"), and most later composers followed his example, Tchaikovsky (who also composed an *Overture on the Danish National Hymn*) carried forth the Mendelssohnian practice in labeling such works as his *Hamlet*, his notorious *1812*, and the "overture-fantasy" that opens this evening's concert.

This well beloved work represents the mature and respected Tchaikovsky's final thoughts on a piece he had been urged to compose at the beginning of his creative career, when he had barely finished his formal studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. The urging came from Mily Balakirev (1837-1910), a remarkable composer in his own right but perhaps remembered more for his productive influence on his colleagues than for his own music. Balakirev was the guiding spirit of the group of Russian nationalist composers known as "The Mighty Handful" (or simply "The Five"), and a benevolent influence on Tchaikovsky, who was not part of that group. It was Balakirev, citing his own *King Lear Overture* by way of Shakespearean precedent, who suggested to Tchaikovsky, in the summer of 1869, that he compose a "program overture" on *Romeo and Juliet*—and even jotted down a few bars which he felt might be useful in depicting the feud between the Montagues and the Capulets.

Tchaikovsky accepted the suggested subject, but created his own themes, and duly submitted his score to Balakirev for comment. While Balakirev complained that the work's opening resembled a Haydn string quartet, whereas he had suggested a Lisztian chorale, and felt the love theme was "lacking in spiritual quality," in the main he expressed admiration for the work, happily accepting the dedication and declaring the score Tchaikovsky's first all-round success. The audience at the premiere (Moscow, March 16, 1870) did not respond well to the piece, but Nikolai Rubinstein, who conducted (and was to preside over the premieres of many of Tchaikovsky's subsequent works), insisted that the score be published at once, in spite of Balakirev's objections and Tchaikovsky's own reluctance.

Tchaikovsky, in fact, proceeded to revise the score, replacing the outer portions with material more in keeping with Balakirev's original suggestions, and that second version was introduced in St. Petersburg in February 1872. Eight years later, with such works as the Fourth Symphony, the "symphonic fantasia" *Francesca da Rimini*, the ballet *Swan Lake* and the opera *Evgeny Onegin* behind him, Tchaikovsky subjected his *Romeo and Juliet* to further revision, but this final version was apparently not heard until May 1, 1886, when Mikhail Ippolitov-Ivanov, the composer of *Caucasian Sketches*, conducted it in Tiflis (the Georgian capital, now called Tbilisi); it proved to be an instantaneous success everywhere, and even now remains the most generally admired specimen of its genre, the symphonic poem.

John Warrack, in his very useful biography of Tchaikovsky, observes that in suggesting this work

> Balakirev had hit upon a subject that exactly matched Tchaikovsky's talents and his whole approach to music. . . . Though the ingredients of the drama are predictable . . . these are made into an abstract drama. . . . The threefold exposition of the theme does not parallel the course of the play, and Tchaikovsky's intention is really to take it not as subject so much as analogy. The subjection of this emotional and musical material to a kind of sonata form has its own expressive force; for as well as conferring a coherent form upon the music, it can embody the notion of something inexorable guiding the music, a course of events imposed from outside the actual themes and thus seeming to rule them arbitrarily.

In the final year of his life Tchaikovsky composed a setting of part of the love scene from Shakespeare's play, using material from this overture. Had he lived longer he might have produced a full operatic treatment of *Romeo and Juliet*. It seems unlikely, though, that such a work, no matter how accomplished, could have matched the eloquence, the poignancy or the all-round evocative power of this superb encapsulation of the drama's essence in orchestral terms. ■

Concerto for Marimba and String Orchestra

ECKHARD KOPETZKI
Born December 9, 1956, Hanover
Now living in Sulzbach-Rosenberg, Bavaria

Eckhard Kopetzki studied at the University of Osnabrück and the Hochschule für Musik in Würzburg to prepare himself as a teacher of music and physics. Since 1985 he has been teaching percussion instruments, theory and harmony at the Berufsfachschule für Musik in Sulzbach-Rosenberg,

in Bavaria. He has composed music for instructional use as well as concert works, and his name has become especially linked with the marimba in a long and still-expanding list of compositions for the instrument, among which we find such titles as *Marimba Joy* (ten light solos), *Easy Rock* (three light pieces for marimba and drum set); *Marimba Splash* (a *Konzertstück* for two marimbas and percussion quartet); *Double Groove*, for marimba and vibraphone; *Night of Moon Dances* (for two marimbas, saxophone and orchestra); Double Concerto for saxophone, marimba and orchestra; *Summer Waltz* (for marimba solo and orchestra); *Marimba in the Wind* (for marimba and wind orchestra), and the solo piece *Canned Heat*. He has won prizes for his compositions, several of which have been recorded, and he frequently serves as a juror at international competitions.

The concerto performed in the present concert was composed in 1998 for the Polish virtuosa of the marimba, Katarzyna Myćka—not exactly a formal commission, the composer explains, but more in the nature of a request from a good friend whom he admires. The score bears a dedication to Ms. Myćka, who gave the premiere in Stuttgart on June 5, 1999, with the Camerata Pforzheim, and subsequently recorded the work with the Saarbrücken Radio Symphony Orchestra under Dominique Fanal, on the Audite label.

Mr. Kopetzki describes the concerto as being "in a late Romantic/Impressionistic style, because Katarzyna Myćka likes this kind of music very much." The work is further described by the composer as a concerto in the strictest sense which "places the main emphasis on the manifold possibilities of the marimba." As the list of titles given above illustrates, the marimba is an instrument with which this composer is intimately associated and which he understands completely. It is not treated as a "novelty" in the concerto, but is given a role as serious as it is demanding, in solo passages and in dialogue with the string orchestra.

There are four substantial movements, adding up to about 25 minutes of music: an opening *Allegro vivace*, a slow movement (*Lento*), a *Scherzo*, and a finale whose slow introduction leads to an *Allegro moderato* which is interrupted by a brief *Andante*. There is a cadenza in the first movement and another cadenza, accompanied by the orchestra, at the end of the finale. ■

Symphony No. 5 in C minor, Op. 67

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

The Fifth Symphony was composed between 1805 and 1808, from sketches made as early as 1800, but mostly in 1804. Beethoven conducted the first performance on December 22, 1808, at the Theater an der Wien, in a program in which he introduced several other works and made his last public appearance as piano soloist with an orchestra (in the Fourth Concerto and the Choral Fantasy). The Sixth Symphony (the *Pastoral*) was among the other works on the program, and on that occasion the numbering of the two symphonies was reversed. Over the years since that event, the Fifth has lost neither its power nor its pertinence, and familiarity seems neither to diminish its self-renewing freshness nor threaten its central position in the hierarchy of the symphony.

And that is a position that would be hard to exaggerate. If the work that opens the present concert is the paradigmatic example of the symphonic poem, then much the same may be said of the concluding work in respect to the symphony. For some two hundred years the Beethoven Fifth has been the most widely recognized representative of the symphony, the quintessential work of the genre as Beethoven redefined it. That is not to say it is the "greatest" symphony, or even the greatest of Beethoven's. The composer himself considered the *Eroica* (No. 3) the finest of his symphonies, at least until he produced the last of his nine—but the Fifth, in its various patterns and emotional qualities, came to represent the very essence of the Romantic symphony, in its drama, its urgency, and its very proportions. In the second half of the nineteenth century composers throughout Europe, consciously or otherwise, made this work the template of their endeavors. Tchaikovsky, in a famous letter to his pupil and associate Sergei Taneyev, defended his own Fourth Symphony against Taneyev's charge that the work had failed because it was obviously "program music" by invoking this work:

> Isn't a program precisely what one would expect from a symphony, the most lyrical of musical forms? Should it not express everything that words cannot—things that rise in the heart and cry out for expression? In my innocence I thought the idea behind my symphony was so plain that everyone would grasp it, or at any rate its chief outlines, without the need of a written program. . . . I don't express any new thought, and haven't even tried to. The idea . . . is basically a reflection of Beethoven's Fifth—not the musical content, of course, but the central plan. Must I tell you that the Fifth not only has a program, but such an obvious one that everybody agrees about it? The same ought to apply to my symphony; if you haven't grasped the program there, all it proves is that I am no Beethoven—and I won't dispute that!

Tchaikovsky did give a detailed program for his own Fourth Symphony in another letter, to his patron Nadezhda von Meck. Beethoven, however, never said a word about a "program" for his own Fifth, even though he was not at all reluctant to affix the label *Pastoral* to his Sixth, which he introduced in the same concert as the Fifth, with descriptive headings for each of that work's five movements and more than a few imitations of various sounds of Nature. Perhaps he felt, as Tchaikovsky did about his own Fourth, that the "programmatic" content was so obvious that no one would fail to grasp it. Or perhaps he simply didn't think about it. What it boils down to, in any event, is the dramatic pattern called "victory through struggle," a subtext found in so many later symphonies by Russians, Frenchmen, Britons, Scandinavians and Americans—many of whom, consciously or otherwise, also adapted Beethoven's overall layout and his use of what came to be called "cyclic themes": a motif or motifs recurring, in one form or another, throughout all the movements of the work.

But Beethoven was creating rather than imitating this now familiar format. The Fifth Symphony is perhaps the most concentrated and insistent of his several more or less contemporaneous works—among the others being the opera *Fidelio*, the aforementioned *Eroica*, and the incidental music for Goethe's heroic tragedy *Egmont*-- which we recognize as manifestations of the defiant, rebellious, unstoppable ideals associated with this composer and his time, incorporating the highest aspirations of the human spirit. The Fifth rings with the same spiritual triumph as the "Symphony of Victory"

that concludes the *Egmont* music and the celebrated Overture. Perhaps it was more than the coincidence of the opening motif's fitting the Morse Code symbol for the letter V, and that letter's being itself another symbol for the number five, that led to the use of the Symphony's opening motto to represent "V for Victory" throughout the Second World War: how remarkably pertinent the entire work is to such a concept, and what a sweeping, unarguable triumph it embodies!

And, apart from this effective wartime symbolism in the middle of the twentieth century, and apart from the example the Fifth provided for so many subsequent composers of varying styles and outlooks, this defining symphony is music which, like these other examples just mentioned, universally and unmistakably proclaims the name *Beethoven*. One of the composer's great biographers, Emil Ludwig, referred to the Fifth Symphony as nothing less than "the greatest portrait that Beethoven has given us of himself." ■