

Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra
2015-2016 Mellon Grand Classics Season

February 12 and 14, 2016

JURAJ VALČUHA, CONDUCTOR
JOSHUA ROMAN, CELLO

RICHARD WAGNER “Prelude and Liebestod” from *Tristan und Isolde*

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK Concerto in B minor for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 104
I. Allegro
II. Adagio ma non troppo
III. Finale: Allegro moderato
Mr. Roman

Intermission

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY *Romeo and Juliet*, Overture-Fantasy

GEORGES BIZET Suite from *Carmen*
Les Toréadors (Act IV)
Prélude (Act I)
Aragonaise (Prelude to Act IV)
Intermezzo (Prelude to Act III)
Danse Bohême (Act II)

PROGRAM NOTES BY DR. RICHARD E. RODDA

RICHARD WAGNER

Born 22 May 1813 in Leipzig; died 13 February 1883 in Venice

“Prelude and Liebestod” from *Tristan und Isolde* (1854-1859)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Munich, 10 June 1865; Royal Court Theater; Hans von Bülow, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 16 December 1898; Carnegie Music Hall; Victor Herbert, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 17 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, three flutes, three oboes, English horn, three clarinets, bass clarinet, three bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, harp and strings

Wagner provided a synopsis of the emotional progression of the action of *Tristan* whose voluptuous prose is not only a sketch of the events of the story, but also a key to understanding the surging sea of passion upon which the entire world of this opera floats:

“Tristan, the faithful vassal, woos for his king her for whom he dares not avow his own love, Isolde. Isolde, powerless than to do otherwise than obey the wooer, follows him as bride to his lord. Jealous of this infringement of her rights, the Goddess of Love takes her revenge. As the result of a happy mistake, she allows the couple to taste of the love potion which, by the burning desire which suddenly inflames them after tasting it, opens their eyes to the truth and leads to the avowal that for the future they belong only to each other. Henceforth, there is no end to the longings, the demands, the joys and woes of love. One thing only remains: longing, longing, insatiable longing, forever springing up anew, pining and thirsting. Powerless, the heart sinks back to languish in longing, in longing without attaining; for each attainment only begets new longing, until in the last stage of weariness the foreboding of the highest joy of dying, of no longer existing, of the last escape into that wonderful kingdom from which we are furthest off when we are most strenuously striving to enter therein. Shall we call it death? Or is it the hidden wonder-world from out of which an ivy and vine, entwined with each other, grew up upon Tristan’s and Isolde’s grave, as the legend tells us?”

The sense of longing is generated right at the beginning of the opera. Its *Prelude* is built, in the composer’s words, from “one long series of linked phrases,” each of which is left hanging, unresolved, in silence. Of the remainder of the *Prelude* and its progression to the *Liebestod* (“Love-Death”), Wagner wrote, it moves from “the first timidest lament of inappeasable longing, the tenderest shudder, to the most terrible outpouring of an avowal of hopeless love, traversing all phases of the vain struggle against the inner ardor until this, sinking back upon itself, seems to be extinguished in death.” The *Prelude* is constructed as a long arch of sound, beginning faintly and building to a huge climax near its center before dying away to silence. In Wagner’s concert version, the *Liebestod* follows without pause, and it, too, generates a magnificent tonal gratification at the point near the end of the opera where the lovers find their only possible satisfaction in welcome death. Of this sublime moment, Wagner wrote, “What Fate divided in life now springs into transfigured life in death: the gates of union are thrown open. Over Tristan’s body the dying Isolde receives the blessed fulfillment of ardent longing, eternal union in measureless space, without barriers, without fetters, inseparable.”

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born 8 September 1841 in Nelahozeves, Bohemia; died 1 May 1904 in Prague

Concerto in B minor for Cello and Orchestra, Opus 104 (1894-1895)

PREMIERE OF WORK: London, 19 March 1896; Philharmonic Society Orchestra; Antonín Dvořák, conductor; Leo Stern, soloist

PSO PREMIERE: 21 January 1934; Syria Mosque; Antonio Modarelli, conductor; Gregor Piatigorsky, soloist

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 40 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: woodwinds in pairs plus piccolo, three horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle and strings

During the three years that Dvořák was teaching at the National Conservatory of Music in New York City, he was subject to the same emotions as most other travelers away from home for a long time: invigoration and homesickness. America served to stir his creative energies, and during his stay from 1892 to 1895 he composed some of his greatest scores: the “New World” Symphony, the Op. 96 Quartet (“American”) and the Cello Concerto. He was keenly aware of the new musical experiences to be discovered in the land far from his beloved Bohemia when he wrote, “The musician must prick up his ears for music. When he walks he should listen to every whistling boy, every street singer or organ grinder. I myself am often so fascinated by these people that I can scarcely tear myself away.” But he missed his home and, while he was composing the Cello Concerto, looked eagerly forward to returning. He opened his heart in a letter to a friend in Prague: “Now I am finishing the finale of the Cello Concerto. If I could work as free from cares as at Vysoká [site of his country home], it would have been finished long ago. Oh, if only I were in Vysoká again!”

The opening movement is in sonata form, with both themes presented by the orchestra before the entry of the soloist. The first theme is heard immediately in the clarinets. “One of the most beautiful melodies ever composed for the horn” is how the esteemed English musicologist Sir Donald Tovey described the major-key second theme.

Otakar Šourek, the composer’s biographer, described the second movement as a “hymn of deepest spirituality and amazing beauty.” It is in three-part form (A–B–A). A touching bit of autobiography is attached to the composition of this movement. While working on its middle section, Dvořák learned that his sister-in-law, Josefina Kaunitzová, who had aroused in him a secret passion early in his life, was seriously ill. He showed his concern by using one of her favorite pieces in the central portion of this *Adagio* — his own song, *Let Me Wander Alone with My Dreams*, Op. 82, No. 1. She died a month after he returned to Prague in April 1895, so he revised the finale to include another reference to the same song to produce the autumnal slow section just before the end of the work.

The finale is a rondo of dance-like nature. Following the second reprise of the theme, the *Andante* section recalls both the first theme of the opening movement and Josefina’s melody from the second. A brief and rousing restatement of the rondo theme led by the brass closes this majestic Concerto.

PIOTR ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY

Born 7 May 1840 in Votkinsk; died 6 November 1893 in St. Petersburg

Romeo and Juliet, Overture-Fantasy (1869, revised 1870 and 1880)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, 16 March 1870; Russian Musical Society Orchestra; Nikolai Rubinstein, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 27 January 1898; Carnegie Music Hall; Frederic Archer, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 21 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: pairs of woodwinds plus piccolo and English horn, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

Romeo and Juliet was written when Tchaikovsky was 29. It was his first masterpiece. For a decade he had been involved with the intense financial, personal and artistic struggles that mark the maturing years of most creative figures. Advice and guidance often flowed his way during that time, and one who dispensed it freely to anyone who would listen was Mili Balakirev, one of the group of amateur composers known in English as “The Five” (and in Russian as “The Mighty Handful”) who sought to create a nationalistic music specifically Russian in style. In May 1869, Balakirev suggested to Tchaikovsky that Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* would be an appropriate subject for a musical composition, and he even offered the young composer a detailed program and an outline for the form of the piece. Tchaikovsky took the advice to heart, and he consulted closely with Balakirev during the composition of the work. Though his help came close to meddling, Balakirev’s influence seems to have had a strong positive effect on the finished composition.

Tchaikovsky's *Romeo and Juliet* is in a carefully constructed sonata form, with introduction and coda. The slow opening section, in chorale style, depicts Friar Lawrence. The exposition (*Allegro giusto*) begins with a vigorous, syncopated theme depicting the conflict between the Montagues and the Capulets. The contrapuntal interworkings and the rising intensity of the theme in this section suggest the fury and confusion of a fight. The conflict subsides and the well-known love theme (used here as a contrasting second theme) is sung by the English horn to represent Romeo's passion; a tender, sighing phrase for muted violins suggests Juliet's response. A stormy development section utilizing the driving main theme and the theme from the introduction denotes the continuing feud between the families and Friar Lawrence's urgent pleas for peace. The crest of the fight ushers in the recapitulation, in which the thematic material from the exposition is considerably compressed. Juliet's sighs again provoke the ardor of Romeo, whose motive is here given a grand, emotional setting that marks the work's emotional high point. The tempo slows, the mood darkens, and the coda emerges with a sense of impending doom. The themes of the conflict and of Friar Lawrence's entreaties sound again, but a funereal drum beats out the cadence of the lovers' fatal pact. Romeo's theme appears for a final time in a poignant transformation before the closing woodwind chords evoke visions of the flight to celestial regions.

GEORGES BIZET

Born 25 October 1838 in Paris; died 3 June 1875 in Bougival, near Paris

Suite from *Carmen*

PREMIERE OF WORK: Paris, 3 March 1875; Opéra-Comique; Adolphe Deloffre, conductor

PSO PREMIERE: 16 February 1900; Carnegie Music Hall; Victor Herbert, conductor

APPROXIMATE DURATION: 13 minutes

INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, two clarinets, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp and strings

Carmen, Prosper Mérimée's earthy novella of 1845, was an unlikely subject for Georges Bizet to have chosen for representation at the Opéra-Comique, whose bourgeois works had accustomed the theater's audiences to lighthearted, happy-ending stories disposed in breezy musical numbers separated by spoken dialogue. Heroism, tragedy and recitative were reserved for the hallowed environs of the Paris Opéra. Even though Bizet and his librettists, Henri Meilhac and Ludovic Halévy, smoothed the edges of the story and the characters (*Carmen* was little more than a raw prostitute in Mérimée's novella), critics and audience were bemused by the tragic progression of its plot, the depth of its characterization, the lubriciousness of its emotions, and the cumulative power of its impact at the opera's premiere on March 3, 1875. Though *Carmen* did not initially achieve the success Bizet had hoped, neither was it the fiasco that some legends later made of it. It was retained in the Opéra-Comique repertory, and given 35 times before the end of the 1875 season and thirteen the next, though Bizet died in Paris exactly three months after the premiere, knowing little of the opera's success. *Carmen* then was produced to much acclaim across Europe and in America (first at New York's Academy of Music on October 23, 1878), and by the time it was revived at the Opéra-Comique, in 1883, the original spoken dialogue had been replaced with composed recitatives by the New Orleans-born composer Ernest Guiraud. *Carmen* was invariably performed in this through-composed version until Bizet's original score again came to light in the 1960s.

Carmen continues to excite and intrigue as do few other musical works. The fascination of the opera is not just in the glorious music but also in the characterization and dramatic power that electrify the score: *Carmen* herself is an unfathomable mixture of dark sensuality and steely scorn; Don José is an all-too-human Everyman, drawn like a moth into the searing flame of *Carmen*'s temptations; Micaëla is sweet and good and pitiable and defeated by events beyond her control; Escamillo, the Toreador, parades his machismo as a mask for his lack of feeling and tenderness.

The *Les Toréadors* (Act II) is the swaggering melody of the haughty bullfighter Escamillo. The Prelude to Act I serves as the gateway to the fiery and tragic tale that follows. The *Aragonaise* (Entr'acte to Act IV), brilliant and languorous by turns, sets the scene for the opera's tragic conclusion. The Intermezzo (Entr'acte to Act III) provides a quiet, lyrical foil to the surrounding events. The *Danse Bohême* (Act II) is the fiery music marking *Carmen*'s return to her Gypsy band after fleeing from Seville.