

Great Russian Ballets

Thursday, May 17 – 8 pm

Alexander Prior, conductor

Edmonton School of Ballet (Margaret Flynn, Artistic Director / Terra Mahood, choreographer)

Cantilon Chamber Choir (Heather Johnson, Artistic Director)

TCHAIKOVSKY

The Nutcracker, Op.71: Act I

Overture

Decoration of the Christmas Tree

March

Children's Galop and Entry of the Parents

Arrival of Drosselmayer

The Nutcracker; Grandfather's Dance

Arrival of Clara and the Nutcracker

The Battle Between the Nutcracker and the Mouse King

In the Christmas Tree

Waltz of the Snowflakes

PROKOFIEV

Romeo and Juliet, Op.64: excerpts

program subject to change

The Nutcracker, Op.71: Act I

Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

(b. Kamsko-Votinsk, 1840 / d. St. Petersburg, 1893)

Ballet first performed: December 17, 1892 in St. Petersburg

The ESO last performed the Suite from The Nutcracker in December 2009

The last of the three great ballet scores **Piotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840-1893) wrote, ***The Nutcracker*** premiered on December 18, 1892, less than a year before he died. But what Tchaikovsky had really wanted to write was the opera *Iolanta*, and he said as much to the Director of Imperial Theatres in Russia. The latter, however, was enthusiastic on his own balletic retelling of the E.T.A. Hoffmann tale *Nussknacker und Mausekönig* ("The Nutcracker and the Mouse King" – itself a version of a story by

Alexandre Dumas *père*). The two men came to what amounted to a *quid pro quo*; Tchaikovsky wrote *Iolanta* as a one-act opera, while the two-act *Nutcracker* ballet was featured on the program in a double bill.

Iolanta lingers among Tchaikovsky's least-heard works. *The Nutcracker*, despite the lack of enthusiasm on the part of its composer, despite the story's lack of any dramatic weight, and despite initial critical reaction, has become one of the most enduring works in the entire canon. The ballet itself is established as a Christmas tradition all over the world.

The majority of the "story" told in *The Nutcracker* takes place in Act I. Here, we meet the well-to-do family of Clara, an adolescent girl, as they gather for a Christmas party. The enigmatic Drosselmayer, godfather to Clara and a bit of a magician, joins the festivities. He gives Clara the gift of a nutcracker in the shape of a soldier, but Clara's younger brother breaks it in a fit of jealousy. Later, the party done and the house abed, Clara returns to the room where the broken nutcracker is. The clock strikes midnight – suddenly Drosselmayer is there; he fixes the broken toy just as a pitched battle begins in the room between an army of mice and toy soldiers (the latter of whom are led by the now-repaired nutcracker). At the height of the battle, Clara throws her shoe at the Rat who is leading the mouse army, an act which gives the nutcracker the chance to press the advantage and win the day. The magic scene continues as the nutcracker is transformed into a handsome young prince, who takes Clara on a journey to an enchanted, snow-filled forest.

Romeo and Juliet, Op.64: excerpts

Sergei Prokofiev

(b. Sontsovka, 1891 / d. Moscow, 1953)

Ballet first performed: December, 1938 in Brno

The ESO performed the Balcony Scene from *Romeo and Juliet* at Sobey's Symphony Under the Sky 2008

On its way to becoming a great work of art, a masterpiece's path can prove quite circuitous. Prokofiev's initial plan for a ballet based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* began with the Kirov Theatre. When they backed out, Moscow's Bolshoi became involved. But what may be truly surprising is that the original conception for the ballet gave Shakespeare's first tragedy a happy ending – Romeo arrives just in time to ensure the young lovers survive. "The reasons for this bit of barbarism were purely choreographic," Prokofiev writes amusingly in his memoir, "living people can dance, the dying cannot." Prokofiev goes to note that while the English (whom one would think would regard Shakespeare's canon as sacrosanct) were fine with the alternative ending; "our own Shakespeare scholars proved more papal than the pope and rushed to the defense of Shakespeare."

In the end, it was another pragmatic reason that restored the original, tragic conclusion. The music for the ending, a friend pointed out to Prokofiev, was never really happy in the first place. He agreed, and a choreographic solution was found to leave the original ending. While still working on the ballet itself,

Prokofiev fashioned two orchestral suites from the music he wrote, and the orchestration for the suites differs from the music written for the stage. The acoustics of the Kirov Theatre made the more delicate parts hard to hear, so Prokofiev had to alter his scoring a number of times during rehearsals. The end result, however, is one of the most celebrated ballet scores in the repertoire. "His Juliet is my favourite heroine," wrote Galina Ulanova, who premiered the role, "the quintessence of that radiance, humanism, spiritual purity, and nobility that is to be found in almost everything he wrote."

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