

## MUSIC APPRECIATION – TUESDAY 14<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER 2023, SESSION 3

Today we shall be listening to three members' choices, exploring different classical renderings of "Romeo & Juliet" and then continue by looking at pieces by other Russian composers, often widely known but some "off the beaten track" so memorable but less well known. As usual, a brief synopsis of the composer and then a short expose of the particular piece we are about to hear. Firstly, a member's choice

**Charles Williams (1893–1978).** His real name was Isaac Cozerbreit of Polish Jewish ancestry. British-born, a freelance violinist but studied at the Royal Academy of Music. Wrote scores of music for inter alia Gaumont films. Light classical style composing theme tunes for Dick Barton Special Agent (Devils Galop), The Potters Wheel BBC music interlude and opening for Friday Night Is Music Night. We shall be listening to "Dream of Olwen" which I played while you were filing in.

The Dream of Olwen features as the main plot device, reprised at intervals throughout the 1947 film 'While I Live'. Set in Cornwall, it tells the story of a prodigious young pianist and composer who sleepwalks off a cliff after completing the piece. 25 years later, a mysterious woman turns up who can expertly play the piece. But who is she? If you want to find out, it on Talking Pictures on Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> November at 11am.

**Romeo and Juliet. Here countless composers have written, but we will listen to just three of them.**

**Ilwych Tchaikovsky (1840-1893).** Was half French (mother) and half Russian. He was the son of a mining engineer. For four years after leaving school, he was a clerk, only going to the Conservatoire aged 23. He had a patroness, Nadezhda von Meck, with whom he had an extraordinary 14-year relationship carried on entirely by correspondence. In 1877 he married, but it lasted just a month and ended in a nervous breakdown. He was a covert homosexual. In 1893 he committed suicide with arsenic. Notwithstanding immense personal problems his output of 169 pieces covered ballet (Swan Lake and Nutcracker), symphonies, concertos for violin and piano and the acclaimed 1812 overture. We will however be playing part of his Romeo and Juliet which is a stand-alone piece. Tchaikovsky's "Love Theme and Finale" is full of tension, drama and soaring climaxes.

**Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953).** Was born in Ukraine but lived in Russia. He was a 20<sup>th</sup>-century musical colossus writing in a romantic style but with modern diatonal elements. Musical parents. He composed his first piece aged 5 and his first opera aged 9. Eccentric, arrogant, and regarded education as a chore. He was a Chess Master as well. He moved to the USA and France after the Russian Revolution but returned to the USSR during the war. Great pals with and musically aligned with Stravinsky who said he was the greatest 20th-century composer after himself of course, Low key burial, because he died on the same day as Stalin.

Dance of the Knights: Romeo and Juliet had a poor first reception in 1936 so he rewrote the ballet which was revived and only became successful in 1962. This excerpt is from the second part where the rival Montague and Capulet factions do battle before Romeo meets Juliet. But there is a twist to the plot because in Prokofiev's ballet, the lovers do not die.

**Craig Armstrong (b 1959).** Scottish, wrong end of Glasgow. He sees no difference between branches of music from pop to jazz or classical. He has written for the Royal Shakespeare Company and has written numerous film scores including Love Actually, Moulin Rouge and The Great Gatsby. Armstrong's score for Baz Luhrmann's Romeo & Juliet earned him a BAFTA for Achievement in Film Music. Here we will hear a short excerpt from the Balcony Scene. In the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, we are awash with lovely classical music.

**Now returning to two requests from members attending last time.**

**Richard Strauss (1864-1949).** German. He was a child prodigy but dropped out of university. His father banned him from listening to Wagner but later with Liszt, the main influence on his career, he became best known for his tone poems and operas. Remained happily married to an eccentric and difficult woman for over 50 years. His reputation was besmirched by his close association with Hitler. Died of kidney failure but at his son's behest he wrote the 4 last Songs just before his death. We don't have time to play these but we will put a link on the website if anyone wants to hear them.

Der Rosenkavalier (The Cavalier of the Rose). Written in 1911 and set in Vienna ca 1840 tells the story of a young girl, the dashing young man she falls in love with, and how they outwit the pompous nobleman she is due to marry. Very weighty music – it has a bittersweet side dealing with ageing and loss. The opera is long so as someone else has asked us to play waltzes here are the Waltz Suite No. 1 (Act 1 and 2).

**We now move on to other Russian composers.**

**Alexander Borodin (1833-1887).** He was born and died in St Petersburg. He was primarily a busy medical man and also a professor of chemistry. He wrote only 31 works, spending little time writing romantic classical music joking that it only occupied his leisure time when he had a cold in the head. In his late 20s, he met Balakirev and became a member of "The Five" where the group were much influenced by Russian folk music and legend.

The Polovtsian Dance comes from his opera Prince Igor. He died at a fancy dress ball so this was finished much later by Rimsky Korsakov. He was a master of harmony and rhythm, the exhilarating dances at the end of Act 2 which I also played while you were coming in today, tell of Prince Igor and his son being captured by Konchak who commanded his slaves to perform

these thrilling dances for them. Some will remember the music being adapted for the film Kismet and also the song “Stranger in Paradise”.

**Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978).** Son of Georgian craftsmen – late starter not destined for music. Inspired by folklore his musical melodies are full of improvisations and variations sometimes with oriental overtones. To sample, I will play a piano transcription from his Gayanne ballet suite – “Sabre Dance”. This is off-beat, bombastic, with a pulsating rhythm, a repetitive theme and a simple melody to express the sabre dancer’s happiness and patriotism.

Next, we will listen to an excerpt from Spartacus Adagio. Glorious love theme where Spartacus is rebelling against Rome and manages to free the women slaves. TV addicts will recognize it as the theme tune from the Onedin Line

Interval for discussion about future themes and an opportunity to leave or go for a comfort break. On return, we will play either or both slow movements from Shostakovitch’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Piano Concerto and Rachmaninoff’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Piano Concerto (the top choice of Classic FM listeners in 2023).

**Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975).** Very famous Russian composer, also a successful banker, football lover and football referee. Liked playing cards. Initially envisaged a career as a concert pianist but was not highly regarded, unlike his compositions. Noted for film music, much of it lost, but equally for orchestral works eg Leningrad Symphony No 7. A perfectionist – obsessed with cleanliness, and synchronized clocks. He even sent letters to himself to test the postal service. Denounced by the Soviet Government and had to tread very carefully. Heavy smoker who also liked his vodka and died of cancer. Piano Concerto No 2 – slow movement. Lovely melody and tone as much of his music had a tonal brilliance and was highly chromatic which always made use of strong contrasts.

**Sergei Rachmaninoff (1873-1943).** Most famous Russian pianist, conductor and composer. Wrote his first piano concerto at age 18. Hugest hand span in classical music. Had to get permission to marry his first cousin. Left Russia after the revolution and settled in the USA. A tall man with a “six-foot scowl”. Very religious but loved fast cars and speedboats. Died of melanoma. I will play snatches from the first and third movement of his second piano concerto before listening to the second which featured largely in the film “Brief Encounter”. Written 1900-1901 when in deep depression. Writing the piece when under therapy is a truly remarkable work leading to his survival. Top choice of 300 for Classic FM listeners