

### *Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare*

From a poem by *Arthur Brooke* (1562), A five act romantic tragedy, first performed 1594-95, set against a backdrop of 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy, *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the world's most famous love stories. It is the most popular Shakespearian play, and has been filmed - from a silent version in 1916 to a 1968 production and a 1996 version. Apart from the main theme of love, the play takes in such themes as friendship, betrayal and human conflicts.

*Romeo and Juliet* are two young teenagers whose parents are the most influential and wealthy in all Verona - the Montagues and the Capulets. *Romeo*, a Montague, gets the opportunity to go to a Capulet's feast and meets *Juliet*, a Capulet, they fall in love instantly. Unfortunately these families have been in conflict for a long time, leaving the two young lovers to keep their relationship a secret.

They are married secretly by Friar Laurence and plan to run away, but on their wedding day, tragedy happens when *Romeo* kills *Juliet's* cousin Tybalt, to avenge his friend *Mercutio's* death. *Romeo* is then banished from Verona - leaving his bride of a few hours heartbroken. Her father, who knows nothing about her wedding, is planning for her to marry a man called Paris. *Juliet* is desperate and goes to Friar Laurence for help. He gives her a potion which would make her appear dead and then allow her to escape the marriage and be with *Romeo*.

Friar Laurence sends a letter to *Romeo*, informing him of their plan, but it is already too late. News of *Juliet's* death arrives before the letter and *Romeo* believing that *Juliet* is now dead is plunged into deep despair to join *Juliet* in death. He buys a lethal poison from an apothecary and flees to Verona where *Juliet* lies beautifully in her tomb. *Romeo* then calls on death to unite him with his love, takes the poison and dies. Only moments later, *Juliet* awakens and upon finding *Romeo* poisoned, stabs herself with his dagger and falls dead on his body.

The main theme of the play is a love which destroyed hatred. It was only through the sacrifice of the young lovers that the Montague and Capulet families were able to reconcile with one another.

### *'Romeo and Juliet' Fantasy Overture by Tchaikovsky*

The idea of a 'fantasy overture' on Shakespeare's play, *Romeo and Juliet* was first suggested to Tchaikovsky by Balakirev, a famous Russian composer, in 1869. He took up the idea with great enthusiasm and finished the work that year. It was first performed in Moscow in 1870, with little success. Tchaikovsky revised it, Paris condemned this version, so he revised it again. The 1880 version is the form in which we hear the work today. He dedicated it to Balakirev, who told him that it was his best work.

The overture does not attempt to follow the order of events in the play, but recreates the atmosphere of the drama as a whole.

It is scored for a large orchestra, with a piccolo and a cor anglais in addition to double woodwind, four valve horns in F, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, percussion including cymbals, bass drum, harp and strings. At times it is very noisy.

Although the work is programme music, based on three elements of the play, Friar Laurence, the two lovers and the background of the family feud, it is also in classical sonata form - ***Introduction, Exposition, Development, Recapitulation and Coda***. It is an example of late Romantic music, full of passion and expression.

***Introduction:*** It starts in f# minor with a solemn introduction that represents the character of the priest, ***Friar Laurence***, beginning in low clarinets and bassoons. This is a slow hymn-like tune that is modal in character. We hear this tune many times during the course of the overture as he intercedes over and over on behalf of the lovers. Uncertain tonality suggests an air of mystery.





furore of semiquaver runs in the strings, starting at 345, with angry syncopated chords in the rest of the orchestra, sweeps all before it, and leads to a ff recapitulation at 353. This movement is free sonata form as it is not typical to use introductory material in the development section.

**Recapitulation:** The first subject is much shorter than in the Exposition and consists only of its final section, corresponding with 151-161. A tempestuous run at 365, 2<sup>nd</sup> section of subject 2 (e) in oboe and clarinet, with the semiquavers still muttering away underneath the violins. It builds up to a forte statement of the first section (d) in unison strings at 389 which carries on to (f) at 397, now over a dominant pedal of D major, a semitone higher than before, a tremendously powerful statement of (d) starts at 411 against throbbing triplets and strong chords in the brass.

It quietens down for a moment at 419, when a subdued reference to (d) appears in cello and bassoon imitated by flute and oboe. The restlessness breaks out again in the violins. The love theme imitations and the restless strings gather strength until there is another tutti appearance of (d) at 436.

By 441 the rhythm of the first subject is breaking through and at 446 it takes command of the orchestra again, with the semiquaver runs in the strings seeming even more tempestuous than before. Friar Laurence's theme tries to break through in the brass at 450 and again at 458, but to no avail, the Friar Laurence theme and the love music contrasting with the helplessness of the individuals overwhelmed by fateful events. By 462 it is like all hell let loose, with every available instrument, including full percussion joining in the fracas.

The climax is at 473, then at 479, the lower strings are left with a reference to the love theme, which is broken into at 483 with a ff drum roll, then silence, signalling the death of the lovers.

**Coda:** A tragic Coda starts at 485. Over a drum roll, the strings give broken utterances to parts of the love theme (d). The triplet idea at the beginning gives an atmosphere of a funeral. At 494 the woodwind and horns play chords based on (e). The harp adds its colour at 508, then the strings have a final reference to the love theme (d). The final chord in the last 4 bars reverts to the ff syncopations of the first subject signalling that even though the lovers are dead the fight goes on.