



Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky Romeo and Juliet Overture

Premiere: May 1, 1886 – Tbilisi, Russian Empire

Adapted from
Phillip Huscher's Program
Notes for the Chicago Symphony

No other play by Shakespeare has inspired as many composers as *Romeo and Juliet*. More than twenty operas have been written on *Romeo and Juliet*, and Bernstein's urban *West Side Story* suggests that the fascination with this subject hasn't waned in our own time. And Prokofiev's 1940 ballet is now recognized as a twentieth-century classic. But none of these works has surpassed the popularity of Tchaikovsky's fantasy-overture. The Russian composer Mily Balakirev apparently first suggested the play to Tchaikovsky as early as the summer of 1869.

Surprisingly, Tchaikovsky found his own voice with this work; *Romeo and Juliet*, a "Fantasy-Overture after Shakespeare," is his first masterpiece.

In 1878, while he was recuperating from his failed marriage at his brother Modest's house, Tchaikovsky turned to *Romeo and Juliet* and was struck by its potential as a great operatic subject.

Seldom in Tchaikovsky's music are form and content as well matched as in *Romeo and Juliet*. The contrast between family strife and the lovers' passion ideally lends itself to sonata

form, with two dramatically contrasted themes; the conflict assures a fierce and combative development section. Tchaikovsky begins as Balakirev recommended, with solemn and fateful chords that suggest the calm, knowing voice of Friar Lawrence. The street music is noisy and action-packed. The famous love theme begins innocently in the English horn and violas; it was one of Tchaikovsky's boldest moves to save the big statement of this great melody, fully orchestrated and greatly extended—the way most listeners remember it—for much later, at the climax of the recapitulation. The lovers' music returns once again in the coda, signaled by the timpani's dying heartbeat, but there it sounds cold and lifeless.



Georges Bizet Carmen Suites

Premiere: March 3, 1875 – Paris

Carmen's love is unlike the love represented by Debussy or Tchaikovsky. This love represents a fatal romance that is rooted in selfishness and tempestuous desires. Carmen and Don José's lust is dangerous, unhealthy, and untenable.

Bizet's *Carmen* is based on Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novella *Carmen*.

Georges Bizet was a very successful student at the Paris Conservatory where began at the age of ten. He won many prizes there and abroad including the most-prestigious Prix de Rome in 1856. However, he had limited success in public theaters and concert halls. Before the Franco-Prussian War in which Bizet fought, he married Geneviève Halévy, the cousin of Ludovic Halévy the eventual co-librettist of *Carmen*. In 1875, his life was cut short at the age of 37 when he died on his 6th anniversary of high fever and a fatal heart attack in Bougival, a town along the Seine River where he composed *Carmen*, and both Renoir and Monet painted the countryside.

The first love story we explore this afternoon has become one of the most popular operas of all time. Immediately after seeing it, Tchaikovsky said this of *Carmen*: "Carmen is a masterpiece in every sense of the word... I am convinced that in 10 years it will be the most popular opera in the entire world." This was actually a very controversial remark at the time because it was not a popular opera during Bizet's lifetime. It actually offended the Parisian audiences in 1875, and one critic even complained that "[Carmen] was not sufficiently melodious."

Claude Debussy The Girl with Golden Hair

Premiere: May 25, 1910 – Paris

The Girl with Golden Hair

Poem by Charles-Marie-René Leconte de Lisle (1818 - 1894)
Translated by Keehun Nam

Who sits on the lucerne in flower,
And sings out in the early morn?
It is the girl with golden hair,
And lips like cherries, singing there.

Love sang with the trilling lark
In the brilliant summer sun.

Your mouth is full of sweet temptation,
And all its colors are divine.
Let's talk while we lie here together,
Your eyes looking deep in mine.

Love sang with the trilling lark
In the brilliant summer sun.

Do not be cruel by saying no!
Do not deceive by saying yes!
Give me a glance as lavish as
Your eyes and those two rosy lips.

Love sang with the trilling lark
In the brilliant summer sun.

Farewell the deer, farewell the hare,
Farewell the partridge! Here's my prize –
To lie and kiss your yellow hair,
And press my lips to your red lips.

Love sang with the trilling lark
In the brilliant summer sun.

The Girl with Golden Hair was originally written as prelude No. 8 in Debussy's first book of *Préludes*. Inspired by Leconte de Lisle's poem of the same name, the piece is one of Debussy's most simple yet masterful achievements. The light texture of this piece and its charming nature perhaps represents the simple but charming nature of this love.

The presumed male voice in *The Girl with Golden Hair* is paradoxically very similar and very different from *Carmen's* love for Don José. On one hand, it is extremely seductive. The allusions to the different animals being preyed upon is like *Carmen* seducing Don José. On the other hand, it is much less fleeting than *Carmen's* short-lived infatuation. It is surprising that the narrator is going

back and forth between the past tense and the present tense.

This love is also different than the love between *Romeo and Juliet* as it does not require death to become transcendent. There is no ancestral feud to overcome. *The Girl with Golden Hair* represents the sincerest passion and deep affections.

Claude Debussy Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun

Premiere: December 22, 1894 – Paris

Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun is one of Debussy's most revolutionary pieces. Pierre Boulez said of the piece that it "brought new breath to the art of music." Debussy said of his own work that:

The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé's beautiful poem. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it.

Although Mallarmé was against Debussy's setting of his poem on principle (words were perfect on their own), he wrote the following to Debussy after hearing it at a concert:

I have just come out of the concert, deeply moved. The marvel!

Your illustration of the Afternoon of a Faun, which presents a dissonance with my text only by going much further, really, into nostalgia and into light, with finesse, with sensuality, with richness. I press your hand admiringly, Debussy.

*Yours,
Mallarmé.*

Initially composed for a Ballet Russes production, *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* is part of a long line of 20th century's greatest works commissioned by Diaghilev such as Rimsky-Korsakov's *Schéhérazade*; Stravinsky's *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *Rite of Spring*; Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloé*; and Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*.

The love in this work is represented by the Faun's retelling of the sensual dream he had of his encounter with Nymphs. This love is

much closer to lust than a deeply abiding affection. For the Faun, it is all about the physical encounter. Debussy himself wrote of the tone poem:

Rather there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the timorous flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature.

The sensual chromatic melody of the flute in the *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* has much in common with the seductive chromatic melody of the *Habañera* song in *Carmen*. This perfectly captures the similarity between *Carmen's* lust for Don José and the Faun's lust for the Nymphs.

