Romeo & Juliet

Gustavo Gimeno, conductor

Matthew-John Knights
Lines, Layers, Ligaments
(TSO Commission)

Sergei Prokofiev
Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 44
I. Moderato
II. Andante
III. Allegro agitato
IV. Andante mosso – Allegro moderato

Intermission

Sergei Prokofiev/
compiled by Gustavo Gimeno
Suite from *Romeo and Juliet*
I. Montagues and Capulets
II. The Young Juliet
III. Dance
IV. Masques
V. Romeo and Juliet (Balcony Scene)
VI. Death of Tybalt
VII. Romeo and Juliet before Parting
VIII. Romeo at the Grave of Juliet
IX. The Death of Juliet

Program 1

Thursday,
November 20, 2025
7:30pm

Friday,
November 21, 2025
7:30pm

Saturday,
November 22, 2025
7:30pm

A TSO Live Recording

These concerts are being recorded for future release by the Harmonia Mundi record label. Audience members are requested to refrain from applause between movements, ensure that all electronic devices are turned off, and avoid turning program pages while the performance is in progress.

The November 20 performance is generously supported by Sheryl L. & David W. Kerr.

Matthew-John Knights (b. 1995)

Lines, Layers, Ligaments

TSO Commission
Composed 2023

5 min

FROM THE COMPOSER: *Lines*: La Monte Young once wrote a piece called Composition 1960 #10 ("to Bob Morris"), in which the entirety of the score was simply the direction "draw a straight line and follow it." In general, I think this is good advice. I love the concepts of lines in music (although none of mine are particularly straight), and I explored as many lines as I could within the orchestra. Follow these lines and see where they take you.

Layers: I wanted to take advantage of the huge number of very talented and highly trained musicians that play together in an orchestral piece, so I asked myself how best to take advantage of this. The answer I arrived at is to give each player more independence. In writing an orchestral piece, composers often think about background, middle ground, and foreground elements, but I wanted to take this a step further and see how many layers I could explore. The lines are varied, and rarely doubled. Gestures are doubled, but the details are fuzzy. Combine the layers and see what happens.

Ligaments: In anatomy, a ligament is a piece of connective tissues holding bones together. In this piece, something needs to connect all the lines and layers, and here, the orchestra's members all work together like ligaments do, to make a living, breathing thing come to life. Connect the lines, combine the layers, and see where they take you.

> *"Draw a straight line and follow it.*
>
> —LA MONTE YOUNG

COMPOSER BIO: Dr. Matthew-John Knights, DMA, is a Canadian composer whose interest in music started at a young age. They took piano lessons beginning early on, under tutelage of their grandmother, and then started writing notes on paper as soon as they learned how. Those early compositions may not have been great, but they showed a proclivity for the craft.

It wasn't until the end of their bachelor's degree in piano performance that Knights realized their need to pursue composition seriously and began taking lessons with Kelly-Marie Murphy, who mentored Knights through to the end of their master's degree at the University of Ottawa. Knights completed their doctoral studies at the University of British Columbia under the supervision of Dorothy Chang in August of 2024. During their doctorate, Knights focused on fusing music and theatre in non-traditional ways, addressing topics such as sexuality and mental health, in the hopes of breaking down the stigma that surrounds these issues in the concert hall.

Throughout their years as a composer, Knights has picked up a number of accolades including winning the Maria Anna Mozart Award from Symphony Nova Scotia in 2024, the Ruth Watson Henderson Award for Choral Composition in 2021, and a SOCAN Foundation Award for Young Composers in 2020. Their music has been performed in a variety of settings across the country as well as in the US, and by acclaimed groups such as the Elmer Iseler Singers, Standing Wave, the Winnipeg Symphony Orchestra, and the Toronto Symphony Orchestra.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 44

Composed 1928

34 min

IGOR STRAVINSKY'S FAMOUS DECLARATION that Sergei Prokofiev was "the greatest Russian composer of today—après moi" was largely true for much of the 20th century. But from today's vantage point, another candidate for that title would have to be Dmitri Shostakovich, whose fast-rising popularity in recent decades has come to overshadow in some ways that of his slightly older counterpart. That said, Prokofiev's importance cannot be denied, and he arguably might even be due a reappraisal.

Stravinsky was the radical innovator and later the neoclassicist, and Shostakovich made clear the angst, pain, and even horror of living under an authoritarian regime in his often subversively socio-political works. But Prokofiev's musical niche can be harder to pin down, much like his nomadic life in which he left his homeland a year after the Russian Revolution in 1917, travelling first to the US and then Germany and France before settling permanently back in Russia in 1936.

A modernist who experimented with complex rhythms, augmented harmonies, and chromatic dissonances, he also sometimes looked back to the worlds of Mozart and Haydn as he did in his popular "Classical" Symphony (1917). Prokofiev created masterworks across an array of forms, including his oft-performed ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, his suite from the film *Lieutenant Kijé*, and his children's work *Peter and the Wolf*. But besides his "Classical" Symphony and Symphony No. 5, which was ranked number 21 on the *BBC Music Magazine* 2016 list of the greatest symphonies of all time, many of his other five works in the form are heard less frequently.

That's unfortunate, because the Symphony No. 3 in C Minor, Op. 44, has much to offer. A kind of reclamation project, the music derives from Prokofiev's opera *The Fiery Angel*, which was to be featured at the Berlin State Opera between 1927 and 1929, but the performance never took place and no other production materialized during Prokofiev's lifetime. Not wanting the music to go to waste, the composer adapted parts of the opera for this symphony, but he used these excerpts in an abstract way and did not try to carry over the opera's story in any programmatic fashion. That said, this intense, often stormy work has a theatrical, even cinematic feel.

The heart of this symphony is the remarkable third movement, "Allegro agitato", a driving, tumultuous scherzo that is marked by angry snare-drum rolls, lonely flute and trumpet solos, and darting, overlapping, and disorienting glissandos or slides in the upper register of the violins. After a more relaxed middle section, the ferment returns, finally ending with a series of sharply dissonant chords.

A clangorous, oscillating theme punctuated with chimes sets the mood for the restless first movement, "Moderato", with its pressing urgency and big, sweeping gestures. It ends with a quieter though still unsettled recapitulation capped by an eerie contrabassoon solo, setting the stage for the gentler second movement, "Andante", with its sombre, even melancholy moments. Rumbling lower brass, bass-drum rolls, and anxious strings power the muscular fourth movement, "Andante mosso – Allegro moderato". The clouds seem to dissipate at times, but the clanging of a bell pushes this symphony to an appropriately agitated, discordant conclusion.

—Program note by Kyle MacMillan

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)/
comp. Gustavo Gimeno (b. 1976)

Suite from *Romeo and Juliet*

Composed 1935–1940

43 min

OVER THE CENTURIES, at least 60 composers have written musical works directly inspired by Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a handful of which still receive regular performances, including Vincenzo Bellini's opera *I Capuleti e i Montecchi* (*The Capulets and the Montagues*, 1830), Charles Gounod's five-act *Roméo et Juliette* (1864), and Hector Berlioz's "symphonic drama" *Roméo et Juliette* (1839). Thirty years after Berlioz, a young Tchaikovsky sidestepped the thorny question of how to set Shakespeare's words to music by creating a strictly orchestral setting.

Tchaikovsky's three great ballet scores—*Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker*—came later, inspiring many latter-day Soviet practitioners, none more so than Prokofiev (whose early efforts were motor-driven exercises in conscious modernity). With *Prodigal Son* (1929), he began moving toward a warmer approach, and, in 1934, the Leningrad Opera and Ballet Company (later renamed the Kirov) commissioned him to compose a *Romeo and Juliet* ballet.

Prokofiev and the company's director, Sergei Radlov, spent months working on the scenario, including, at one point, attempting to give it a happy ending. "The reasons for this particular bit of barbarism were purely choreographic," Prokofiev recalled. "Live people can dance, but the dying can hardly be expected to dance in bed."

The project's path to fruition was fraught. Newly installed company management at the Kirov had doubts about Shakespeare as ballet and withdrew. Prokofiev then struck a deal with Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre and completed the score in five months, only to have the Bolshoi directors also dismiss it as "unsuitable for dancing."

Undaunted (and in hope of having a calling card for the full ballet), Prokofiev arranged from it a set of ten piano transcriptions and two orchestral suites (a third followed in 1946), which were warmly received. In 1939, the Kirov agreed to mount the production, but two weeks before the scheduled première, the company's dancers and musicians, accustomed to virtually plotless divertissements set to loud music, rebelled, voting to cancel the production "to avoid a scandal."

Despite these and other complications, the production's première on January 11, 1940, was a triumph: the music was instantly hailed as a masterpiece. As the Kirov's star choreographer, Leonid Lavrovsky, described it: "Prokofiev developed the principles of symphonism in ballet music. He was one of the first Soviet composers to bring to the ballet stage genuine human emotions and full-blooded musical images. The boldness of his musical treatment…served to turn the performance into a dramatic entity."

For the three individual suites Prokofiev compiled while the full ballet was in limbo, he cherry-picked movements from the full ballet score, with concert logic taking precedence over dramatic sense. The suite you will hear in this performance draws from all three suites, thereby re-establishing the throughline and emotional power of the magnificent full score.

—Program note by Don Anderson

For a biography of Gustavo Gimeno, please turn to page 8.