

Our title today is, of course, taken from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a tragic tale of young love and death against a background of a murderous interfamilial feud. We will be building up to that, in roughly ascending order of tragic-ness.

Ferdinand Hérold's ***Zampa*** was first performed in 1831 and ran to over five hundred performances in Paris. It was also popular in Germany and Italy, and was performed in New Orleans and London. It seems to be a cross between *The Pirates of Penzance* (there are marauding pirates, including one who turns out to be a long-lost brother) and *Don Giovanni* (there is a statue who comes back to life and drags the engaging anti-hero down to hell) with added convolutions, including a hilarious sub-plot about the servants and an opportunely timed off-stage eruption of Mount Etna. The Overture brings us swashbuckling, skullduggery, melodrama, comedy and wistful romance.

As a struggling young composer Antonín Dvořák did have a brush with romantic tragedy; she just wasn't into him. He got over it, by marrying her sister, and by 1878 had advanced enough in his craft to be commissioned, at the recommendation of Johannes Brahms, to produce a set of ***Slavonic Dances*** for piano four hands. Dvořák used Brahms' *Hungarian Dances* as a model, drawing on traditional rhythmic patterns and structures from Bohemian folk music to produce a set of eight lively and cheerful toe-tappers. His publishers immediately asked for an orchestration and it was this that really made Dvořák's name on the wider European concert scene. A second set, which brought in styles from Poland, Serbia and Ukraine as well as Bohemia, followed in 1886; and the Dances, individually or together, have remained concert favourites ever since. We bring you three of them.

No. 6 is a sousedská, a (relatively) laid back triple-time dance usually performed in pairs.

Number 10 (no. 2 of the second set) is a dumka, a Ukrainian form characterised by sudden changes from melancholy to exuberance.

No. 8 is a furiant, characterized by rapid tempo and irregular changing rhythms.

Broadly, the plot of Henrik Ibsen's play ***Peer Gynt*** is that Peer is thrown out of his Norwegian village home for being a miscreant and a ne'er-do-well, goes off and Has Adventures from which he returns after many years and finds redemption through a good woman's love, the (not particularly convincing) moral being To Thyself Be Enough. It's not performed very often; it takes about five hours, involves forty changes of scene and requires a cast of fifty as well as extras to be trolls, madmen, Arabs, dancing girls and Norwegian sailors among others. A deeply weird silent film version was made in 1941 starring the seventeen-year-old Charlton Heston, who went on to win a chariot race and an Oscar, and directed by David Bradley, who went on to make *They Saved Hitler's Brain*, acclaimed in its day as the worst film of all time. Both films are available on YouTube, but you have been warned. Anyway, Edvard Grieg wrote some incidental music for the opening night of the play, in 1876, and subsequently extracted two Suites which became and remain very popular in their own right. We bring you three of the first suite.

Morning originally opened Act IV. It is a marvellous evocation of mountains, forests and rushing water, which is odd because it is supposed to set the scene in the Moroccan desert.

Åse's Death closes Act III. Peer's mother dies, neither the first nor the last woman to be bitterly disappointed in him.

In the Hall of the Mountain King is a dream sequence in Act II. Peer gets into trouble for not marrying the Troll King's daughter, and trolls discuss whether to hack off his fingers, boil him into soup or brown him on a spit. Grieg said "I have written something that so reeks of cowpats, ultra-Norwegianism, and 'to-thyself-be-enough-ness' that I cannot bear to hear it", but it has since been used by everybody from The Who to Sonic the Hedgehog.

William Shakespeare's play ***Romeo and Juliet*** was immediately successful; by 1597 its publishers claimed "it hath been often (and with great applause) plaid publicly", and it was also one of the first Shakespeare plays to be performed outside England (in Germany, in 1604). Samuel Pepys in 1662 wrote that it was "a play of itself the worst that I ever heard in my life" but it has since inspired operas, films, novels, paintings, a manga adaptation; and, of course, a ballet. Sergei Prokofiev's score was commissioned by the Kirov Ballet in 1935 and originally included, rather horrifyingly, a happy ending. An initial staging took place in what is now Czechia, though not without difficulty; the dancers found the complex meters "undanceable". A revised version, with a significantly amended score and truer to Shakespeare's tale, received its premiere in Leningrad in 1940, and it has been a repertoire staple for every ballet company worth its salt ever since.

Prokofiev extracted from his score three concert suites, assembled with a view to musical rather than narrative coherence. We bring you some of Suite 1 and the first part of suite 2.

In the first extract, *Scene*, citizens of Verona get started on the day.

Jump ahead to *Madrigal*, in which the recently-met Romeo and Juliet snatch tender moments between interruptions at the Capulet party.

Back now to *Masks*, where Romeo and his mates indulge in some flashy footwork before crashing said party in disguise.

Flash forward to where it all goes horribly wrong with *The Death of Tybalt*. Brass howl and violins shriek as the enormity of what has just happened dawns on Romeo.

Finally, we return to the best-known bit of the ballet, *Dance of the Knights*. The ominous opening section is borrowed from an earlier scene where the Prince of Verona declares that he has had it up to here with the feuding families, and then we get the Capulet party started. The family sweeps through an implacable, menacing formation dance, there is a brief interlude where Juliet makes her enchanting public debut, delighting poor old Paris and fatally catching the eye of Romeo, and we close with more doom and darkness.

Programme notes by The Jabberer