

# SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

MUSIC TELLS THE STORY AT POWELL HALL THIS SEASON,  
AND FEW STORYTELLERS HAVE INSPIRED MUSIC SO POTENTLY  
AS WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

BY RAPHAEL MAURICE



CHRIS LEE

Leila Josefowicz performs John Adams's recent violin symphony,  
*Scheherazade.2*, February 19-20.

This spring, the St. Louis Symphony commemorates the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death through the music of numerous composers who were inspired by the Bard of Avon. From Jean Sibelius's *The Tempest* to Hector Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, the power of Shakespeare's works may be heard as testaments to his own gifts as a playwright and poet, along with a greater realization of the role of his literature in music.

The festival begins (February 19-20) with Selections from *The Tempest* by Sibelius, one of the last works the composer wrote before he entered his long musical silence. One reviewer, commenting on both the composer and the playwright on the opening night, wrote, "these two geniuses have finally found one another." Shakespeare peoples his plays with every sort of

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VICTOR MANGONA

Leonard Slatkin returns to conduct Berlioz's *Roméo et Juliette*, March 11-12.

character and personality. They possess a complete range of human emotions while exhibiting inward thoughts and dramatic action, and members of Shakespeare Festival St. Louis will join the Symphony and David Robertson to help bring those to life. But there are also places and landscapes to be imagined in his theater, as well. Sibelius was inspired by the sounds of surf and sea while making *The Tempest*; the overture comes to a lull and then crashes over the listener.

Also on the program to open the Shakespeare Festival are the quarreling lovers Beatrice and Benedict from *Much Ado About Nothing*, musically expressed by Berlioz, as well as the St. Louis premiere of John Adams's *Scheherazade.2*, with guest violin soloist Leila Josefowicz. The *Tales of the Arabian Nights* are not Shakespeare, but they contain universes within their spry narratives and rich characters. Adams re-imagines Scheherazade as "a woman who can speak back to power." He calls his new work a symphony, similarly to how Berlioz called his Shakespeare-inspired works "dramatic symphonies." *Scheherazade.2* will be well-matched with the outspoken Beatrice and *The Tempest's* Miranda.

A Family Concert is part of the celebration as well (February 21). In partnership with Shakespeare Festival St. Louis, the St. Louis Symphony performs music from Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Sibelius's *The Tempest*, among other works, to add dramatic effect to an original play. A father and daughter find comfort in Shakespeare's stories, and on a dark and stormy night learn one of the least familiar, *Pericles*. You'll learn it, and all its wonders, too.

With just a taste of Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for the Family Concert, audiences may enjoy the full work the next weekend (February 27-28). In 1826 Felix Mendelssohn wrote the concert overture to Shakespeare's enchanting dream comedy. Just a few years before the composer's death, he wrote

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Incidental Music for the play, and then combined the overture with the longer piece, both drawing directly from the music and characters from Shakespeare's comedy. From Mendelssohn's Scherzo to the joyous and triumphant Wedding March, we hear *A Midsummer Night's Dream* jump to life in song.

Tchaikovsky's *Hamlet* (March 5-6) comes with the somber and startling overture that projects the tempestuous and anguished history of Hamlet's family life, his metaphysical quandaries, his own moments of quick insight and flashes of despair. Although not as well-known as many other pieces by Tchaikovsky, *Hamlet* conveys the emotional power and dazzling energy often associated with the composer.

The Second Piano Concerto of Dmitry Shostakovich connects with Hamlet in the character of the composer himself. The play is full of questions, beginning with "Who's there?" Is Hamlet truly mad? He gives us his thoughts, but they often conflict with his actions. Shostakovich was a Hamlet-man. Is his music filled with secret codes, hidden from an authority that may destroy him?

A third Russian composer joins Tchaikovsky and Shostakovich on this program. Selections from Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, composed originally for ballet in 1935, may astonish audiences with its range of joy and sorrow. The

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lovers' ill-fated stars seem to hover over the music. One hears the light breaking through the window and with it the lovers' tragic fate. One of the most startling and tender pieces from Prokofiev's repertoire, *Romeo and Juliet* trembles between love and loss, paradise and inferno.

Berlioz created his own *Roméo et Juliette* as well, in 1839, for a choral symphony. The polyphony and beauty within this dramatic symphony is worthy of Shakespeare's most enduring poetic scenes of love and hate. St. Louis Symphony Conductor Laureate Leonard Slatkin returns to Powell Hall to conduct the festival finale, to guide the musicians that play and sing the tale of the Capulets and the Montagues, their rivalries and ruination (March 11-12).

Harold Bloom, the esteemed critic and essayist argues that Shakespeare invented the human. All that was possible within the human experience was to be found within the sonnets and plays. This catalogue of the human condition still resonates with us today. We've all known Romeos and Juliets in our lives, as well as young brooding Hamlets. To celebrate Shakespeare through music seems apt; he was an actor, theater producer, and owner as well. It's very possible that the Bard would have loved to see these productions inspired by his words. From the joy of sprites and spirits along an island to Hamlet pondering a skull by the gravesite, the St. Louis Symphony invites you to participate and listen to great composers pay homage to the great writer and inventor of the human.

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