

Jessie Montgomery: *Soul Force*

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky: *Romeo and Juliet*, Overture-Fantasy

Alexander Scriabin: Symphony No. 2 in C Minor, Op. 29

Jessie Montgomery (b. 1981) is an acclaimed composer and violinist who grew up in lower-east-side Manhattan. She began her violin studies at the Third Street Music School Settlement (the longest-running community music school in the United States) and went on to earn music degrees at Juilliard and NYU. She has won national awards, including the ASCAP Foundation's Leonard Bernstein Award, and the Sphinx Medal of Excellence, a high honor that recognizes extraordinary classical Black and Latinx musicians. Her music has been performed by major orchestras across the country, and she is currently composer-in-residence with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, composer-in-residence at Bard College, and Professor of Violin and Composition at The New School in Manhattan.

Montgomery describes her absorbing orchestral work, *Soul Force*:

Soul Force is a one-movement symphonic work which attempts to portray the notion of a voice that struggles to be heard beyond the shackles of oppression. The music takes on the form of a march which begins with a single voice and gains mass as it rises to a triumphant goal.

Drawing on elements of popular African-American musical styles such as big-band jazz, funk, hip-hop and R+B, the piece pays homage to the cultural contributions, the many voices, which have risen against aggressive forces to create an indispensable cultural place.

I have drawn the work's title from Dr. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech in which he states: "We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force."

Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1860) grew up with music at home and school, but he did not have serious musical instruction as a child. His early musical foundations were nourished by his family's *orchestration*: a large, elaborate music box that looks like a player piano and mimics the sound of an orchestra. And at the Imperial School of Jurisprudence in St. Petersburg, a boarding school for boys that he attended throughout his teenage years, he did receive some instruction in choir class.

Upon graduating from boarding school at age 19, Tchaikovsky honored his parents' wishes by taking a job as a clerk with the Ministry of Justice. He held this job for four years, but all the while his fascination with music grew, as did his craving for formal instruction. At age 21 Tchaikovsky took his first class in music theory, and a year later he began as a full-time student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he studied composition, piano, flute, and organ.

Tchaikovsky seeks to tell stories with his music. In addition to the fanciful tales of his ballets (*The Nutcracker*, *Swan Lake*, *Sleeping Beauty*), he sought out many other literary sources for his symphonic music: authors such as Lord Byron (*Manfred* Symphony), Dante (*Francesca da*

Rimini), and of course Shakespeare (*Hamlet, Tempest, Romeo and Juliet.*) *Romeo and Juliet*, conceived as an overture-fantasy by the 29-year-old Tchaikovsky, is considered to be his first true masterpiece.

A listener should not expect to get the entirety of Shakespeare's 5-act play in this 20-minute symphonic poem. Instead, Tchaikovsky provides musical snapshots of various characters and scenes. The pensive opening chorale in the clarinets and bassoons depicts Friar Laurence, as well as setting an appropriately ominous tone for the rest of the work. Several minutes in, the music builds in energy and tension, portraying the discord and enmity of the Capulet and Montague families. As the fierceness of this section subsides, Tchaikovsky introduces the cherished love theme, a melody that has gone on to saturate popular television and film. (Some may even remember the original "Sims" video game using the love theme when the game's virtual people kiss.) This combination of swordplay and passion alternates throughout the work, through to the final timpani roll and menacing minor chords, which bring this timeless story to its tragic conclusion.

One can comfortably put Alexander Scriabin's short life (1872-1915) and works into two "phases": his initial early egomaniac phase, and his later "full-blown weirdo" phase. What, you may ask, is required for one to be viewed through the lens of history as a crackpot? Let's look at the facts at hand: he suddenly quit his teaching job, left his family, and moved in with his age-inappropriate student Tatiana as "a sacrifice to art;" he began to fall under the spell of Theosophy, an occult movement that taught that man should cultivate supernatural powers; and his final, unfinished composition was planned to be synesthetic, meaning that its performance would also employ lights, smells, and touch, and was to be performed at a cathedral in the Himalayas, ushering in some sort of transfiguration of the world and humanity. This project was never fulfilled because he suddenly died, at age 43, from a horrid infection on his face.

Scriabin's Second Symphony (1901) comes towards the end of his early egomaniac phase, before his run-of-the-mill narcissism had blossomed into that of a Messiah-complex crank. Being a virtuoso pianist who wrote almost exclusively for that instrument, composing for the orchestra was newer territory for Scriabin. This epic second symphony was not initially well-received, with hissing and catcalls from the St. Petersburg audience. But since then, more and more conductors have championed this bewitching and passionate work.

The opening of the symphony begins dark and mysteriously, with a haunting low clarinet melody. As various instrumental colors are added throughout the movement, Scriabin plays with the ebbs and flows of sensuous orchestral sound, building to two separate climaxes in the first movement. Without pause, the music proceeds to the second movement, with two distinct characters: commanding and energetic, and the contrasting tender moments that inevitably build back to the assertive boldness of the first character. The ending to the second movement is so powerful that you'll want to applaud, but there are still three more movements to go!

The third movement is leisurely and sublimely luxurious. If you had that extra glass of wine with dinner tonight, you may find yourself dozing off. But don't! This gorgeous movement features delectable birdsong from the flute, and an endless supply of unbridled euphoria from the violins.

If you unwittingly rested your eyelids during the third movement, no worries—movements four and five will snap you right back. The fourth movement, marked *Tempestoso*, brings gusts of wind, driving rain, and no shortage of thunder and lightning. Without pause, the music proceeds to the final *Maestoso*, alternating between dignified triumph and sincerity. And at the very end of this immense symphony, the orchestra will play with such grandiosity that you will see in full the musical portrait of a vain and egotistical artist.

--David H. Johnson

Comments? Questions? Email me at david.johnson@gcsu.edu.