

# SHANGHAI

## SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA



### CELEBRITY INTERNATIONAL ORCHESTRA SERIES

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 19 · 8:00 PM  
COPLEY SYMPHONY HALL

#### **PRELUDE 7:00 pm**

Dr. Paul Pickowicz, distinguished professor of history and Chinese studies at the University of California, San Diego, will give a pre-concert talk: *Is Shanghai the Cultural Capital of China?*

**Long Yu, music director & conductor**  
**Yuja Wang, piano**

**TCHAIKOVSKY**  
(1840-1893)

***Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture***

**BAO YUAN-KAI**  
(b. 1944)

***China Air Suite***

*Zou Xikou* "Going to West Gate"  
*Xiaohe Tangshui* "Flowing Stream"  
*Duihua* "Can You Guess What Flower It Is"

#### INTERMISSION

**RACHMANINOFF**  
(1873-1943)

***Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Opus 18***

*Moderato; Allegro*  
*Adagio sostenuto*  
*Allegro scherzando*  
**Yuja Wang, piano**

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Program subject to change

Ms. Wang records exclusively for Deutsche Grammophon

Program notes by Eric Bromberger

## Romeo and Juliet Fantasy-Overture

**PETER ILYICH TCHAIKOVSKY**

Born May 7, 1840, Votkinsk, Russia

Died November 6, 1893, St. Petersburg

The fateful story of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers has attracted a range of composers, from Bellini to Berlioz, from Gounod to Prokofiev. Perhaps it was inevitable that so dramatic a story should appeal to the young Tchaikovsky, struggling to find his way as a composer. In the summer of 1869, shortly after Tchaikovsky's *First Symphony* had been savaged by critics, composer Mily Balakirev suggested that Shakespeare's play might make a fitting subject for an orchestral work. Balakirev suggested an outline for the piece and even contributed part of a theme. Intrigued, Tchaikovsky set to work on October 7 of that year and had the score in first draft by November 27. It would (eventually) be his first real success.

Tchaikovsky based his work on three separate themes, each meant to portray one of the forces in the play. The chorale-like opening passage suggests the pivotal figure of Friar Laurence, alone in his cell. At the *Allegro giusto*, the music leaps ahead with a dark and thrusting idea that reflects the violent struggles between the Montague and Capulet families. And this in turn gives way to the most famous part of this composition, the soaring love music of the young Romeo and Juliet themselves. But Tchaikovsky tries to treat this music symphonically rather than letting it simply become tone-painting. The themes develop in a sonata form-like structure: they alternate, collide, contrast, and finally drive to the great cataclysm of the end. While the themes may represent specific characters, listeners should be careful not to search too literally for a depiction of the events of Shakespeare's play. Rather, *Romeo and Juliet* should be understood as abstract music-drama, inspired by Shakespeare's tale but not bound by the need for exact musical depiction. This may explain Tchaikovsky's curious choice of subtitle: he called this an "Overture-Fantasy after Shakespeare." The music drives to a shattering climax, falls back to remember the lovers one last time, and ends dramatically.

The first performance, in Moscow on March 16, 1870, was not a great success, and—under Balakirev's guidance—Tchaikovsky revised the work several times over the next decade before he reached a final version in 1880; this may explain why it is one of his few works without an opus number. While early audiences may not have

reacted positively, *Romeo and Juliet* soon became a popular favorite, so much so that when Tchaikovsky made a tour of the United States in 1891 to conduct his own music, he included *Romeo and Juliet* on every program.

## China Air Suite

**BAO YUAN-KAI**

Born January 4, 1944 in Beijing

Bao Yuankai is a prominent composer and educator in China. For all his compositions, teaching posts and awards in a career spanning more than 35 years, his international reputation rests mostly on a single orchestral cycle known as *Rhapsody of China* or *Chinese Sights and Sounds*. The massive work consists of 24 movements divided into six suites, with each movement casting a traditional Chinese theme within a symphonic setting. Bao explained in an interview his intention to "let Chinese people know more about the forms of western music by the melodies that they were familiar with; meanwhile showing foreigners the artistic charm of Chinese music by a form that they are familiar with."

The question of titles deserves brief mention. The selections on this program, grouped as the *China Air Suite*, excerpt four movements out of various suites from *Chinese Sights and Sounds*. Other mentions of this composition refer to it as the *Chinese Folk Music Symphony* or similar variations. The one recording easily accessible in the United States goes by the title *Sketches of Yunnan* and includes recordings of three of the six suites of *Chinese Sights and Sounds*, plus other music. It would be best if we could sidestep the imprecision of translation altogether, Bao's cross-cultural music is self-evident, bridging a cultural divide with delightful and elegant sounds.

The composer has provided the following descriptions of the movements:

*Zou Xikou* ("Going to West Gate") — Popular in Shanxi, Northern Shanxi and Western Inner Mongolia, this folk song talks about the migration of the poor people from the Highlands for a better living. The music adopts the Shanxi tune with the theme of the sad separation between two lovers.

*Xiaohe Tangshui* ("Flowing Stream") — This is a Yunnan folk song describing how a girl is missing her lover under a moonlit night. Different instruments were used to picture the scenery such as the string instruments for the moonlit night, and the piano, harp and glockenspiel for the

flowing stream. The touching melody is then played by the English horn and flute respectively. The music reaches its pinnacle when the low-register part representing the boyfriend plays at half speed and is accompanied by the full string ensemble.

*Duihua* (“Can You Guess What Flower It Is”) — The format of questions and answers is often found in folk songs, especially those about the flowers’ names. This tune is from Cangzhou, and is merged with another folk song, “Flying the Kite,” in the middle part of the piece. The changeable rhythms, contrasted tone colors and frequent shifts of dynamics depict a noisy and gay picture of the cheerful crowd.

## Piano Concerto No. 2 in C Minor, Opus 18

### SERGEI RACHMANINOFF

Born April 1, 1873, Oneg, Russia

Died March 28, 1943, Beverly Hills

The most catastrophic moment in the life of young Rachmaninoff was the première of his *First Symphony* in Moscow in 1897. Sensing disaster, he could not bring himself to enter the hall but sat hunched in a stairwell of the auditorium. Inside, it was just as bad as he feared: conductor Alexander Glazunov was unprepared, the orchestra played badly, and the audience and critics hated the music, one of them describing it as a “program symphony on the Seven Plagues of Egypt.” Rachmaninoff plunged into a deep depression—he destroyed the score to the symphony (it was later reassembled from the orchestra parts) and wrote no music for three years.

Alarmed, the composer’s friends arranged for him to see Dr. Nicholas Dahl, an internal medicine specialist who sometimes treated patients through hypnosis. Dahl was also an extremely cultured man—he was an amateur cellist—and Rachmaninoff’s friends were hopeful that contact with such a man would improve the composer’s spirits. During a lengthy series of visits, the composer heard a steady message of encouragement from the doctor: “You will begin to write your concerto . . . You will work with great facility . . . The concerto will be of excellent quality.” To the composer’s great surprise, the treatment worked. He later said: “Although it may sound incredible, this cure really helped me. By the beginning of summer I again began to compose. The material grew in bulk, and new musical ideas began to stir within me—more than enough for my concerto.” Across the summer of

1900, Rachmaninoff composed what became the second and third movements of his *Second Piano Concerto*. These were performed successfully in December, and Rachmaninoff quickly composed the opening movement. The first performance of the complete concerto, in Moscow on October 14, 1901, was a triumph. Not surprisingly, Rachmaninoff dedicated the concerto to Dr. Dahl.

The *Moderato* begins with solo piano in its deepest register playing quiet chords that have reminded many of the tolling of Russian church bells, one of Rachmaninoff’s favorite sounds. The movement’s impassioned main theme, sung by the strings, is one of those powerful Slavic melodies that haunt the mind, while the yearning second subject is introduced by the piano alone. This music demands a pianist of extraordinary ability (this is one of the most difficult concertos in the literature), and after a sweeping, soaring development of the opening ideas, a quiet restatement of the second subject leads to an emphatic close.

Muted strings introduce the *Adagio sostenuto*, but—in a wonderful touch—the solo flute sings the main theme as the pianist accompanies. The theme is repeated, first by the clarinet and then the strings, growing more elaborate as it proceeds; a brief but spectacular cadenza leads to a recall of the tolling bells from the very beginning and a quiet close. The *Allegro scherzando* begins quietly as well, but this opening is full of suppressed rhythmic energy, which quickly erupts. The second theme, announced by the violas, has become one of those Big Tunes, an inspiration for countless Hollywood composers and—many years later—set to the words “Full moon and empty arms.” If one can escape those associations, this remains lovely music, proof of Rachmaninoff’s considerable melodic gift. Obviously recovered from his depression and creative drought, Rachmaninoff drives the concerto to a knockout close.