

TAMPA BAY TIMES MASTERWORKS

Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet

WITH GERSHWIN'S PIANO CONCERTO

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Polina Nazaykinskaya (1987-)

Winter Bells

Duration: ca. 15 minutes

Most of us are still in diapers at age 2, when Polina Nazaykinskaya would sit at the piano in her parent's home in Tolyatti, a city on the Volga River in southern Russia. She wasn't quite ready for Rachmaninoff, but the tot sensed something special whenever her little fingers touched those black-and-white keys.

She started fiddling on the violin at age 4, when the Music Academy Gymnasium in Tolyatti admitted the precocious young girl for study. After graduating at age 15, she enrolled at the Tchaikovsky Conservatory in Moscow, focusing on violin and composition. Writing music, she thought, would be a cool way to make a living, and she soon moved to the United States to pursue a doctorate.

Composing, however, was more challenging than she expected. In 2009, hoping to write her first substantial piece for orchestra, she began sketching the music for a tone poem.

"But I didn't have the material or an idea with which I could work," she said on her website. "In search of it, I went back to Russia."

While there, she visited villages around the Volga region, recording folk songs handed down over centuries. Then, she turned to nature, hiking mountain ranges and forests, spending long days by herself.

"I was all alone, with the vastness of space and rocks stretching in all directions, when it came to me," she said. "It was a choral, religious motif – and I knew that I had found a key to the symphonic piece."

Winter Bells opens mysteriously, and then a flute appears over a suspension of strings. The orchestra finds its footing on tonal ground, suggesting this will be accessible to all ears. A rhythmic thrust sends the musicians skyward amid crashing cymbals, then horns, woodwinds and percussion add a distinctive Russian color to the mix. Soon, the music builds momentum with jarring brass fanfares before the orchestra drifts into quiet against the tinkle of a triangle.

Akiko Fujimoto, guest conductor of TFO this week, got to know Nazaykinskaya's work while she was associate conductor of the Minnesota Orchestra, which gave the world premiere of *Winter Bells* in 2010.

"She writes cinematically and her music is expansive and very dramatic," Fujimoto said. "She has such a unique voice, and the quality is there. You can feel the temperature in this piece, the coldness of the Russian winter and heat of the passion, so it's both cold and hot. It's very emotional."

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Concerto in F

Duration: ca. 31 minutes

For all its swagger, the *Concerto in F* plays a dark note in the life of its composer, George Gershwin.

On Feb. 11, 1937, while appearing as soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Gershwin went blank. He had been playing his *Concerto* effortlessly for a decade, but the notes suddenly left him. He stumbled, although the orchestra continued, but he regained his composure and finished.

It would be Gershwin's last public performance.

Gershwin – famous for *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Porgy and Bess*, *American in Paris* and dozens of Broadway musicals – suffered a partial seizure, and his condition quickly worsened. Doctors discovered a brain tumor and conducted a risky surgery. Exactly five months to the day of his Los Angeles appearance, he was dead.

Such a downward spiral stands in contrast to Gershwin's brilliantly vertical career and music that not only embraced the infectious gaiety of his time, but bridged the gap between the popular and serious worlds of music.

His first hit, *Swanee*, made him an overnight sensation – and wealthy – at age 21. From that point, he composed as if possessed. His deep reservoir of melody helped give rise to the golden age of song in the 1920s, and his skill as a composer for theater landed him a lucrative contracts in New York and London, resulting in such musicals as *Strike up the Band*, *Girl Crazy* and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Of Thee I Sing*.

“There can be no doubt that Gershwin was an extraordinarily fertile songwriter,” noted the American critic Tim Page. “He made ripe, luscious melodies as an apple tree makes apples; melodies that sound equally at home in a jazz club and a concert hall, melodies characterized by driving energy, near-magical immediacy and a seemingly inevitable vector.”

While *Rhapsody* is an audience favorite, the *Concerto in F* is a more cohesively structured work for orchestra and soloist. In fact, Gershwin composed it to prove he could move beyond the bluesy impressions of *Rhapsody* with a substantial piece of “absolute” music unrelated to any program. For this reason, he changed it from the *New York Concerto* to a piece named only by its key.

Composed in 1925, the work unfolds in a traditional three-movement scheme, each fueled by abundant melody. Four bold strokes by the kettledrum announce its arrival, and the orchestra responds with a jazzy, Charleston rhythm. The piano enters with two hesitant notes, then whispers a quiet fragment of a theme and expands it into the section's defining tune.

For the bluesy middle movement, Gershwin strived for what he called a “poetic, nocturnal tone,” with a witty dialog between soloist and strings. The section closes with biting rhythms and themes recycled from the opening movement. The finale is all playful agitation – note the Bach-like toccata on the piano – and concludes with what the composer described as “an orgy of rhythms, starting violently and keeping pace throughout.”

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)***Suite from Romeo and Juliet. Op. 64***

Duration: ca. 37 minutes

If Prokofiev was remembered for nothing other than his *Romeo and Juliet* ballet, he would still be held in high regard. Of his nine ballet scores, this is undoubtedly his finest effort, a masterstroke in synthesizing music, drama and motion.

Composed in 1935, the music for Shakespeare's famous play was revised over the next five years, and for reasons beyond production problems with the ballet company. The Soviet leader, Joseph Stalin, ruled – and censored – the arts in Russian with an iron fist, threatening anyone who ignored his demand for socialist realism. Stalin's humiliation of Dmitri Shostakovich as a “degenerate modernist” most certainly got Prokofiev's attention.

Prokofiev's first mistake was to give his ballet a happy ending, in contrast to the Bard's tragic coda. The Soviet censors found this not only curious, but controversial. Officials urged Prokofiev to revise his score, and despite his objections, an “altered” version was performed in 1940 by the Kirov Theatre. Ironically, it won the State Stalin Prize. A film version would go on to win a top award at the Cannes Festival in 1955, two years after Prokofiev's death.

The complete ballet consists of 52 numbers and nine scenes, from which Prokofiev composed three suites and 10 pieces for piano. Prokofiev is at his best here, shaping the characters as Mozart does in his operas, capturing the tensions and emotional sweep of Shakespeare's writing, and dressing his score with biting, original coloring. Adding depth to a fully loaded orchestra are tenor saxophone, tambourine, xylophone and tubular bells.

From this wealth of musical material, TFO performs the following sections:

Suite 2, No. 1 – Montagues and Capulets: The feuding families engage in a brawl

Suite 2, No. 2 – Juliet, The Young Girl: Looking in the mirror, she sees herself as a beautiful woman

Suite 1, No. 5 – Masks: Romeo makes his entrance at the Capulets' ball

Suite 1, No. 6 – Romeo & Juliet: The famous balcony scene

Suite 1, No. 7 – Death of Tybalt: Romeo delivers a mortal wound to his adversary

Suite 2, No. 5 – Romeo & Juliet Before Parting: The lovers' final meeting before Romeo flees Verona

Suite 2, No. 7 – Juliet's Grave: Romeo plunges a dagger into his heart, not knowing Juliet will awaken

Program notes by Kurt Loft, a St. Petersburg-based writer and former music critic for The Tampa Tribune.