

Suite from *Der Rosenkavalier*

Richard Strauss

(Born June 11, 1864 in Munich;
died September 8, 1949 in Garmisch-Partenkirchen)

The libretto for *Der Rosenkavalier* (“*The Cavalier of the Rose*”), by the gifted Austrian man of letters Hugo von Hofmannsthal, is one of the masterworks of its type for the lyric stage. It gently probes the budding, young love of Octavian and Sophie, poignantly examines the fading youth of the Marschallin, and humorously exposes the blustering Baron Ochs. It is a superb evocation of sentiment, wit and vigor wedded to one of the most opulently glorious musical scores ever composed. Harold Schonberg wrote of the emotional milieu of the opera, “In *Der Rosenkavalier*, there are no Jungian archetypes, only the human condition. Instead of long narratives, there are Viennese waltzes. Instead of a monumental *Liebestod*, there is a sad, elegant lament from a beautiful, aristocratic woman who begins to see old age. Instead of death, we get a bittersweet and hauntingly beautiful trio that in effect tells us that life will go on as it has always gone on. People do not die for love in Hofmannsthal’s world. They face the inevitable, surrender with what grace they can summon up, and then look around for life’s next episode. As Strauss himself later said, the Marschallin had lovers before Octavian, and she will have lovers after him.” *Der Rosenkavalier* is an opera wise and worldly, sophisticated and touching, sentimental and funny that contains some of the most memorable music to emerge from the opera house in the 20th century.

The Suite that Strauss extracted from *Der Rosenkavalier* includes the Prelude to Act I, the luminous *Presentation of the Rose* from Act II, the blustering *Baron Ochs’ Arrival and Waltz* from Act II, the glorious trio and duet in the opera’s closing scene, and a rousing selection of waltzes from the score.

Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini for Piano and Orchestra, Op. 43

Sergei Rachmaninoff

(Born April 1, 1873 in Oneg (near Novgorod), Russia;
died March 28, 1943 in Beverly Hills, California)

The legend of Nicolò Paganini has haunted musicians for nearly two centuries. Gaunt, his emaciated figure cloaked in priestly black, Paganini performed feats of wizardry on the violin that were simply unimagined until he burst upon the European concert scene in 1805. Not only were his virtuoso pyrotechnics unsurpassed, but his performance of simple melodies was of such purity and sweetness that it moved his audiences to tears. So far was he beyond the competition that he seemed almost, well, superhuman. Perhaps, the rumor spread, he had special powers, powers not of this earth. Perhaps, Faust-like, he had exchanged his soul for the mastery of his art. The legend (propagated and fostered, it is now known, by Paganini himself) had begun.

Paganini, like most virtuoso instrumentalists of the 19th century, composed much of his own music. Notable among his *oeuvre* are the breathtaking Caprices for Unaccompanied Violin, works so difficult that even today they are accessible only to the most highly accomplished performers. The last of the Caprices, No. 24 in A minor, served as the basis for compositions by Schumann, Liszt and Brahms, and was also the inspiration for Rachmaninoff’s *Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini*. Rachmaninoff’s work is a series of variations on this theme, which is characterized as much by its recurrent rhythm (five short notes followed by a longer one) as by its melody. Taking his cue from the Paganini legend, Rachmaninoff combined another melody with that of the demonic violinist — the *Dies Irae* (“*Day of Wrath*”) from the Requiem Mass for the Dead. This ancient chant tune had long been connected not only with the Roman Catholic Church service, but also with musical works containing some diabolical element. Berlioz associated it with the witches’ sabbath in his *Symphonie Fantastique*, Liszt used it in his *Totentanz* (“*Dance of Death*”), Saint-Saëns in his *Danse macabre*, and Rachmaninoff himself in his earlier tone poem *Isle of the Dead*.

The *Rhapsody*, a brilliant showpiece for virtuoso pianist, is a set of 24 variations. The work begins with a brief, eight-measure introduction followed, before the theme itself is heard, by the first variation, a skeletal outline of the melody reminiscent of the pizzicato opening of the variation-finale of Beethoven’s “Eroica” Symphony. The theme, 24 measures in length, is stated

by the unison violins. The following variations fall into three groups, corresponding to the fast-slow-fast sequence of the traditional three-movement concerto. The most familiar section of the *Rhapsody*, and one of the great melodies in the orchestral literature, is the climax of the middle section. This variation, No. 18, actually an inversion of Paganini's theme, has a broad sweep and nobility of sentiment unsurpassed anywhere in Rachmaninoff's works.

Symphonic Dances from *West Side Story*

Leonard Bernstein

(Born August 25, 1918 in Lawrence, Massachusetts;
died October 14, 1990 in New York City)

Leonard Bernstein, a native of Boston, had a productive fascination with New York City for much of his career. Beside being linked with that city's major orchestra for many years as conductor and music director, Bernstein was inspired by the great metropolis in several of his original stage compositions — the ballet *Fancy Free* (1944), the musicals *On the Town* (1944) and *Wonderful Town* (1952), the score for Elia Kazan's film *On the Waterfront* (1954) and the epochal *West Side Story*. The idea for *West Side Story* was suggested to Bernstein as early as 1949 by the choreographer Jerome Robbins, who envisioned a modern adaptation of Shakespeare's classic *Romeo and Juliet* set in New York City. Bernstein was fascinated with the idea, but he could not find time to work on the project until the middle 1950s, beginning composition as soon as he had finished the brilliant score for the operetta/musical *Candide*. Stephen Sondheim, in his Broadway debut, supplied the lyrics, Arthur Laurents wrote the book and Robbins staged the show, which was finally completed in 1957. After try-outs in Washington and Philadelphia, *West Side Story* was unveiled on Broadway on September 26th and ran for almost two years. After a ten-month road tour, it returned to New York and closed on April 27, 1960 after a total of 732 Broadway performances. It was made into a film in 1961 that swept ten Oscars, including Best Picture, and has since entered into the pantheon of the American theater as one of the greatest musicals ever created.

West Side Story was one of the first musicals to explore a serious subject with wide social implications. More than just the story of the tragic lives of ordinary people in a small, grubby section of New York, it was concerned with urban violence, juvenile delinquency, clan hatred and young love. The show was criticized as harshly realistic by some who advocated an entirely escapist function for the musical, depicting things that were not appropriately shown on the Broadway stage. Most, however, recognized that it expanded the scope of the musical through references both to classical literature (*Romeo and Juliet*) and to the pressing problems of modern society. Brooks Atkinson, the distinguished critic of *The New York Times*, noted in his book *Broadway* that *West Side Story* was "a harsh ballad of the city, taut, nervous and flaring, the melodies choked apprehensively, the rhythms wild, swift and deadly." Much of the show's electric atmosphere was generated by its brilliant dance sequences, for which Jerome Robbins won the 1957-1958 Tony Award for choreography. "The dance movements not only epitomized the tensions, the brutality, bravado, and venomous hatred of the gang warriors but also had sufficient variety in themselves to hold audiences spellbound," wrote Abe LaFite in *Broadway's Greatest Musicals*. In 1961, Bernstein chose a sequence of dance music from *West Side Story* to assemble as a concert work, and Sid Ramin and Irwin Kostal executed the orchestration of these "Symphonic Dances" under the direction of the composer. Bernstein said that he called these excerpts "symphonic" not because they were arranged for full orchestra but because many of them grew, like a classical symphony, from a few basic themes transformed into a variety of moods to fit the play's action and emotions. *West Side Story*, like a very few other musicals — *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma*, *Pal Joey*, *A Chorus Line*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Rent* — provides more than just an evening's pleasant diversion. It is a work that gave a new vision and direction to the American musical theater.

In the story, Riff, leader of the Jets, an "American" street gang, determines to challenge Bernardo, head of the rival Sharks, a group of young Puerto Ricans, to a rumble. Riff asks Tony, his best friend and a co-founder of the Jets, to help. Tony has been growing away from the gang, and he senses better things in his future, but agrees. The Jets and the Sharks meet that night at a dance in the gym, where Tony falls in love at first sight with Maria, Bernardo's sister, recently arrived from Puerto Rico. Later that night, Tony meets Maria on the fire escape of her apartment. The next day, Tony visits Maria at the bridal shop where she works, and they

enact a touching wedding ceremony. Tony promises Maria he will try to stop the rumble, but he is unsuccessful and becomes involved in the fighting. He kills Bernardo. Maria learns that Tony has slain her brother. Tony comes to her apartment, but she cannot send him away, and they long for a place free from prejudice. Tony leaves, and hides in Doc's drugstore. Maria convinces Anita, Bernardo's girl, of her love for Tony, and Anita agrees to tell Tony that the Sharks intend to hunt him down. She is so fiercely taunted by the Jets at the drugstore, however, that she spitefully tells Tony that Maria has been killed. Tony numbly wanders the streets, and meets Maria. At the moment they embrace, he is shot dead. The Jets and the Sharks appear from the shadows, drawn together by the tragedy. They carry off the body of Tony, followed by Maria.

The following summary, outlining the stage action that occurs during the Symphonic Dances, appears in the orchestral score:

"*Prologue* (Allegro moderato) — The growing rivalry between two teen-age gangs, the Jets and the Sharks.

"*Somewhere* (Adagio) — In a visionary dance sequence, the two gangs are united in friendship.

"*Scherzo* (Vivace leggiero) — In the same dream, they break through the city walls, and suddenly find themselves in a world of space, air and sun.

"*Mambo* (Presto) — Reality again; competitive dance between the gangs.

"*Cha-cha* (Andantino con grazia) — the star-crossed lovers, Tony and Maria, see each other for the first time and dance together [*Maria*].

"*Meeting scene* (Meno mosso) — Music accompanies their first spoken words.

"*Cool, Fugue* (Allegretto) — An elaborate dance sequence in which the Jets practice controlling their hostility.

"*Rumble* (Molto allegro) — Climactic gang battle during which the two gang leaders are killed.

"*Finale* (Adagio) — As Tony dies in Maria's arms, love music developing into a procession, which recalls, in tragic reality, the vision of *Somewhere*."