

Total performance time: approximately 130', including an interval of 20 minutes

## Philharmonia Orchestra

[Philharmonia Orchestra](#)

[Anu Tali](#) conductor

**Arvo Pärt** (b.1935)

Cantus in Memoriam Benjamin Britten (1977) 7'

**Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840–1893)

Swan Lake, Op.20 (1875–6), excerpts 45'

*Act I: The Palace:*

*Valse*

*Dance of the Goblets*

*Act II: By the Lake*

*Scene*

*Dances of the Swans: iv. 'Dance of the Cygnets'*

*Act III: A Ball at the Castle:*

*Spanish Dance*

*Neapolitan Dance*

*Act IV: By the Lake:*

*Finale*

INTERVAL

**Sergei Prokofiev** (1881–1953)

Romeo and Juliet, Op.64 (1935/1940), excerpts 45'

1. *Scene: The street awakens*

2. *Morning dance*

3. *Juliet as a young girl*

4. *Masks*

5. *Montagues and Capulets*

6. *Dance*

7. *Friar Laurence*

8. *Death of Tybalt*

9. *Romeo and Juliet before parting*

10. *Aubade: Morning serenade*

11. *Romeo at Juliet's tomb, and the Death of Juliet*

The Estonian composer **Arvo Pärt**, now in his late 80s, has become a key figure in the international recognition of Estonia as a serious force in the musical world. From the mid-1970s onwards, and after some silent years, he began to write music in a way that is ostensibly very simple but with an extraordinary ear for texture and sonority – music that is a great deal more than it might appear to be at first sight. *Cantus in memoriam Benjamin Britten* is such a piece. Just after its composition, in 1977, Pärt wrote:

In the past years we have had many losses in the world of music to mourn. Why did the date of Benjamin Britten's death – 4 December 1976 – touch such a chord in me? During this time I was obviously at the point where I could recognize the magnitude of such a loss. Inexplicable feelings of guilt, more than that even, arose in me. I had just discovered Britten for myself. Just before his death I began to appreciate the unusual purity of his music – I had had the impression of the same kind of purity in the ballads of Guillaume de Machaut. And besides, for a long time I had wanted to meet Britten personally – and now it would not come to that.

The music starts with silence (it's written into the score). Three gentle bell-strokes introduce descending scales of A minor, all moving at different speeds in the sections of the string orchestra. The lower pitched the instrument the slower it plays – the double basses moving at 1/16th the speed of the first violins. Over seven minutes or so the volume increases in intensity and the scales slow down – the bell tolling at apparently random intervals. And then, gradually, each line stops. It seems very simple but the effect is very powerful indeed.

The history of ballet in Russia goes back to the 18th century. The first Russian ballet school opened in 1734 and both Moscow and St Petersburg soon had important companies, which went on to become the Bolshoi and the Kirov. It was for the Bolshoi that **Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky** composed the music for *Swan Lake*, with original choreography by Julius Reisinger. The premiere, in 1877, was not a great success, Tchaikovsky's brother Modest writing that 'The poverty of the production, meaning the décor and costumes, the absence of outstanding performers, the Balletmaster's weakness of imagination, and, finally, the orchestra ... all of this together permitted [Tchaikovsky] with good reason to cast the blame for the failure on others.' The success and popularity of *Swan Lake*, surely nowadays one of the best-loved ballets of all, dates from its performances in St Petersburg in 1895, two years after Tchaikovsky's death. The choreography was by Marius Petipa and Lev Ivanov (two acts each) and their work has become the definitive version of *Swan Lake*, to which most later versions have paid homage in one way or another.

The story tells of a princess, Odette, who is cursed by the evil sorcerer Rothbart and turned into a swan by day but reverts to being a woman at night. It is a folk-legend that has been traced back to both Russian and German sources, though the ballet's scenario has undergone a tweak or two since its composition, including allowing the ending to be either sad or 'happy ever after'. The first music we hear tonight is the Act I waltz as Prince Siegfried (all of the best folk-tales have to have a handsome prince, don't they?) celebrates his birthday with his friends. Then we have the 'Dance with Goblets' – a strutting Polonaise and the last dance of the evening

celebrations. We move outdoors to a lake, shimmering in the moonlight, as the Prince and his friends see a flock of swans and Tchaikovsky gives the oboe one of its great orchestral solos. Next there is the Dance of the Cygnets – in Ivanov's 1895 choreography a real challenge for four dancers who must be absolutely in sync. Act III of the ballet takes place in Prince Siegfried's castle as he is about to choose whom he will marry. Various groups of guests dance their party-pieces, including a Spanish Dance (plenty of castanets!) and a Neapolitan Dance featuring a prominent trumpet solo. Finally we hear the music for the denouement of the ballet. Prince Siegfried has unwittingly married Odile (Rothbart's daughter), not Odette, and the ballet ends as Odette sees Siegfried for a final time, dies in his arms and the 'swan lake' rises to drown them both.

If there is one 20th-century ballet that rivals *Swan Lake* in popularity and in the number of performances it receives then it must be *Romeo and Juliet*, with music by **Sergei Prokofiev**. Like *Swan Lake* though, *Romeo and Juliet* did not have an easy start in life, a victim of Soviet politics and their effect on individuals. Prokofiev composed the music in 1935 and the ballet was originally intended for the Kirov in St Petersburg. It was then transferred to the Bolshoi in Moscow but deferred. It was finally premiered, in truncated form, in Brno (then in Czechoslovakia) in 1938 and the complete ballet was not seen in Russia until 1940 at the Bolshoi. At different times Prokofiev made three different suites from the complete score, each of which contains some gems that do not feature in the others so, as so often happens, we are going to hear music selected from all of them this evening. We begin with music from near the beginning of the ballet – a perky melody on bassoons and solo violin depicting 'the street awakening'. It is followed, as it is in the complete ballet, by 'Morning Dance' – in which six horns memorably bray out, indicating conflict is in the air. Then we meet 'Juliet as a young girl', skittish scales in the strings reminding us that she really is very young – in Shakespeare's play she is only 13. At a masked ball we then meet Romeo, Benvolio and Mercutio. They march in to the sound of percussion and introduce themselves with solos from cornet, clarinet and oboe. The most famous music of the whole score follows – 'Montagues and Capulets' – when Prokofiev manages to make a hugely memorable theme mostly from simple arpeggios but with such orchestral skill! The next music comes from close to the opening of the ballet's second act and a street-scene gives the *corps de ballet* a chance to shine – a 'Dance of the five couples'. Then we meet Friar Laurence as Romeo visits him in his cell – noble music featuring the warm sound of divided violas and cellos. The 'Death of Tybalt' describes Romeo's fight with his hot-tempered rival in love and Tybalt's fateful last moments. Listen to those scampering violins before the fatal stabs! A complete change of mood for 'Romeo and Juliet before parting' – tender young love becomes passionate. A lighter moment follows with the 'Aubade' – the 'Morning Serenade' – though it is the morning of the final tragedy. And so we come to 'Romeo at Juliet's Tomb' and 'The Death of Juliet' – him committing suicide because he believes her to be dead, she awakening from the potion-induced sleep that has not killed her, and then committing suicide herself at the realization of what has happened. Prokofiev's music, his mastery of orchestration and his ability to tell a story all come together in one final tragic piece of musical storytelling.

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