ST. OLAF ORCHESTRA

WINTER TOUR 2008

PROGRAM

OVERTURE TO DIE FLEDERMAUS
Johann Strauss, Jr. (1835–1899)

*PREMIÈRE RHAPSODIE
Claude Debussy (1862–1918)

CELLO CONCERTO IN B MINOR, OPUS 104
Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904)

THE GIFT
Steven Amundson (b. 1955)

CELEBRARE CELEBERRIME
Carl Vine (b. 1954)

INTERMISSION

LA VALSE (POEME CHOREOGRAPHIQUE POUR ORCHESTRE)
Maurice Ravel (1875–1937)

SELECTIONS FROM ROMEO AND JULIET, OPUS 64
Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

MONTAGUES AND CAPULETS
Masks
Folk Dance
Death of Tybalt
Romeo at the Grave of Juliet

"MAMBO"
from West Side Story
Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)

*Student soloists will alternate throughout the tour.
DIE FLEDERMAUS OVERTURE (1874)  

Johann Strauss Jr.

With a plot focusing on revenge, mistaken identities, alcohol and bat costumes, Die Fledermaus (The Bat) gives an entertaining glimpse of an exuberant Viennese carnival of the 19th century. Premiered in the wake of a devastating stock market crash, the operetta is characterized by what musicologist Camille Crittenden calls “a nihilistic gaiety,” a trait most aptly displayed by the work’s overture.

The overture opens with a powerful three-note gesture. This important motive recurs later in the operetta at moments relating to identity confusion, in addition to serving as a unifying force in the overture. The bulk of the piece consists of waltzes and polkas (mainstays of the carnival) that are occasionally interspersed with more melodramatic sections. These create an ebullient medley tinged with a hint of tragedy, perhaps echoing the sentiments of the financially stricken Viennese audience. The three-note motive returns again as the piece continues to build in intensity, leading to a thrilling conclusion.

– E.R.

*PREMIÈRE RHAPSODIE (1910)  

Claude Debussy

Though Debussy was classically trained at the Paris Conservatory of Music, he wrote music in a style contrary to traditional composition. Much of his music was inspired by the evocative imagery in the symbolist poetry of Paul Verlaine and Stéphane Mallarmé.

The Première Rhapsodie was composed for a music competition in order to showcase the spectrum of mechanical and expressive capabilities of the clarinet. The tender legato timbre of the opening material is in high contrast to the technical bravura of the middle section. After the brass grab our attention with a whole-tone fanfare, the clarinet leaps to a final statement with explosive energy.

– T.N.

*CONCERTO FOR CELLO AND ORCHESTRA, OP. 104. (1895)  

Antonín Dvořák

David Moon ’08, cello

Until late in his career, Dvořák was skeptical of writing for the cello as a solo instrument. But his Cello Concerto is a testament to its technical dexterity and emotional expression. This monumental work — his final solo concerto — became one of his most famous pieces.

The second movement is a nostalgic lullaby with an edge of bittersweet urgency. The pentatonic melody is reminiscent of African-American spirituals that Dvořák might have heard during his frequent trips to America.

– T.N.

*Tour performances of Debussy’s Première Rhapsodie will alternate with Dvořák’s Cello Concerto.
**The Gift (2008)**

*premiere performance*

The composer provides the following commentary on *The Gift*:

The *Gift* was composed to honor the memory of Eric Drotning, a four-year percussionist in the St. Olaf Orchestra who died in a tragic car accident in June 2005. The work was commissioned by Eric’s parents, William and Christine Drotning ’70, and by his sister Elizabeth Drotning Hartwell ’99.

The piece is based on a short motive derived from the first and last letters of Eric’s first and last names (E-C-D-G). These four notes are employed throughout the piece, often as an upward gesture. These pitches are transposed, reconfigured and continually immersed and woven into the melodic and harmonic fabric of the work.

Beginning quietly in strings, Eric’s four-note motive is clearly evident. Solo clarinet continues with an expanded version of this figure, and other solo woodwinds respond with similar ideas in counterpoint against a backdrop of rich string sonorities. Solo marimba accompanies the cellos as they introduce one of the main themes, *molto espressivo*. I envisioned this as a loving duet between Eric, on one of his favorite percussion instruments, and Elizabeth, a former St. Olaf Orchestra cellist. Solo oboe introduces another lyrical theme repeated by strings in the upper register. Next, a short transition hints at one of the Drotning family’s favorite hymns, “O Day Full of Grace,” as gentle scalar passages in the glockenspiel, celesta and harp rain down gently as heavenly grace. The orchestra gathers all its forces in a broad crescendo, leading to a full statement of the hymn in French horns and a reprise of an earlier theme over a pedal point in timpani. Eric’s motive serves as the main material for a bridge to the final section. Solo woodwinds and strings recall ideas reminiscent of the opening, and the work ends reflectively as the opening strain of the hymn is heard in cellos over a plagal cadence and a final statement of the four-note motive.

Eric Drotning, originally from Albuquerque, New Mexico, was the principal percussionist in both the St. Olaf Orchestra and St. Olaf Band. He was a featured tour soloist and a senior soloist with the St. Olaf Orchestra. He graduated in 2002 with a Bachelor of Music degree in percussion performance. A gifted performer, Eric was also very active in two of this country’s elite drum and bugle corps and served as principal percussionist in the Albuquerque Youth Symphony. While attending graduate school, Eric taught percussion and played professionally in the Cleveland area. He earned the Master of Music in percussion performance at Cleveland State University in 2005.

**Celebrare Celeberrime (1993)**

*Carl Vine*

Carl Vine is one of most exciting composers to emerge from Australia in recent decades. He has written a wide range of music — from film scores and experimental electronic music to symphonies and concertos. The Dayton Philharmonic commissioned this short, energetic work for orchestra that Vine calls a “celebration for orchestra.” The composer includes the following note in the score:

*Celebrare Celeberrime*: to celebrate to the full and with the greatest speed. This title appealed not only as a suitable approach to honor the 60th birthday of the Dayton Philharmonic, but also as a general philosophy of living one’s life to the fullest. In the context of such a short work for full orchestra, the intention was to lead, as quickly as possible, to a sense of joy and excitement without dwelling on the grandiose. The finale of this little joyous work is intended to sound precipitous rather than declamatory, hoping to lead the audience on to anything that might follow.

— T.N.
La Valse (1920)  

Maurice Ravel

“I conceived of this work as a sort of apotheosis of the Viennese waltz, mingled with, in my mind, the impression of fantastic, fatal whirling motion.” Ravel’s description of his at once euphoric and maniacal La Valse alludes to the concept of dualities as the key organizing principle of the piece. As musicologist Deborah Mawer observes, this theme is created through “the work’s moving in and out of focus … between present and imagine past, reality and a fantastical dream-world.”

The piece begins ominously with incoherent mumblings in the low strings. Melodic fragments slowly emerge from the “swirling clouds,” and act as a preview for what is to follow. Gradually, the rhythm and style of the waltz becomes clear as motives become melodies and orchestral textures become more defined. The themes heard at the beginning of the piece are fully developed in the composer’s sensual, Impressionistic style with late-Romantic sentimentality serving as its foundation. Abrupt changes in texture and mood swings paint the dualistic picture of the waltz coming in and out of focus. However, just as the waltz seems to hit its stride, the music quickly dissolves back into the foreboding atmosphere of the beginning. The waltz begins again, but now takes a different direction. Explosive harmonies, fantastic orchestral swells, and chaotic juxtapositions of ideas lead to what the composer calls “a dancing, whirling, almost hallucinatory ecstasy.” There is one last nostalgic glimpse before the waltz spirals out of control, ending with a violent perversion of the dance’s characteristic ¾ meter. But what is one to make of this ending? In the composer’s words: “Some people have seen in this piece the expression of a tragic affair; some have said that it represented the end of the Second Empire, others that it was postwar Vienna. They are wrong. Certainly La Valse is tragic, but in the Greek sense; it is a fatal spinning around, the expression of vertigo and the voluptuousness of the dance to the point of paroxysm.”

— E.R.

Selections from Romeo and Juliet, Op. 64 (1936)  

Sergei Prokofiev

An exceptional talent from an early age, Prokofiev enjoyed great popularity in his lifetime throughout Europe and the United States. But after World War II his music was seen as a threat and attacked by the Soviet government as being “formalist” and “against the people.” The arrest of his wife, multiple heart attacks and being forced to publicly denounce his own music eventually left him a broken man. He died at age 62.

Romeo and Juliet was commissioned by the Kirov Ballet. This version, including a happy ending, was never performed due to fear of backlash from the Party elite after the now famous 1937 denouncement of Shostakovich. Reduced suites of the music were premiered in Moscow and New York, but a significantly revised production with dancing opened at the Kirov (now Mariinsky) Theatre in Leningrad in 1940. Tonight’s performance includes excerpts from the first two ballet suites.

Montagues and Capulets

The opening piercing crescendos announce the entrance of the Prince of Verona. He sternly warns the feuding families against letting their quarrels continue to erupt in violence. The ensuing basse-danse is music from the Capulet ball, with the knights of the family strutting aggressively. Against this, a melancholy minuet portrays Juliet as beautiful but sad and stilted while she dances with her unwanted suitor, Paris.
Masks
At the Capulet ball, masked Romeo with his friends Mercutio and Benvolio mock the guests as they enter the party. The jocular quality of the music demonstrates their naïveté as they fail to realize the danger they are in.

Folk Dance
Music from street musicians is heard while the townspeople celebrate a holiday. This section programatically provides relief from the weight of the lovers’ impending doom and the uneasy tension between the feuding families. It also gives the orchestra a chance to show off, giving primary material to solo brass and woodwinds, contrasted with brilliant string effects.

Death of Tybalt
Sarcastic Mercutio gets into trouble and duels with Tybalt, Juliet’s prideful cousin. A skipping theme in clarinets and upper strings reflects Mercutio’s lack of concern with the situation. The music loses its relatively light character and grows increasingly ominous as Mercutio realizes that he has been fatally wounded. Enraged at Mercutio’s death, Romeo chases Tybalt and they fight fiercely. He stabs his opponent repeatedly, heard as brittle punches in low horns, timpani and low strings. After Romeo flees the Capulets arrive, mourning the loss of their kin. They begin a funerary march, their sorrow drawn out by the long horn melody. However, their wailing morphs from anguish to a spirit of vengeance as they swear retribution against Romeo.

Romeo at the Grave of Juliet
Some of the ballet’s most poignant music accompanies this famous scene where Romeo mourns over his loved one’s body and poisons himself. The aching dissonance piles on more and more intensely until Juliet as well takes her life upon seeing her lover dead.

 L.V.

"Mambo" FROM WEST SIDE STORY (1957)

Leonard Bernstein’s West Side Story is a setting of Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet in 1950s New York City. Two rival gangs, the American “Jets” and the Puerto Rican “Sharks” serve the roles of the feuding families. Mambo, in which two gangs dance competitively in a gym, is perhaps the show’s most famous dance. This is one instance of Bernstein’s ability to take a popular form, in this case the Latin mambo, and effectively score it for full symphony orchestra.

 L.V.