



THE SANTA BARBARA
SYMPHONY
Nir Kabaretti, Music & Artistic Director

**State St
Ballet**
SANTA BARBARA

2025/26 JOINT SEASON OPENER

OCTOBER 18 & 19, 2025

SHOSTAKOVICH | *FESTIVE OVERTURE*

RACHMANINOFF | "MEN'S DANCE" FROM *ALEKO*

PROKOFIEV | *ROMEO & JULIET* ACTS 1 & 2

Nir Kabaretti, Conductor • State Street Ballet • Santa Barbara City College Brass



PROGRAM NOTES



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Festive Overture, Op. 96 (1954)

**by Dmitri Shostakovich
(St. Petersburg, 1906 – Moscow, 1975)**

This witty and cheerful work falls chronologically between two of Shostakovich's most serious symphonies: the Tenth, a complex and brooding work that contains what some consider a "portrait of Stalin," and the Eleventh, which commemorates the bloody events of the 1905 Revolution. Shostakovich reportedly whipped up the Festive Overture in a single day, in response to a call from Vasili Nebolsin, a conductor at the Bolshoy Theatre in Moscow, who urgently needed a festive piece for November 7, the anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917.

Lev Lebedinsky, a musicologist and friend of the composer during the 1950s, claimed in an interview with British cellist and author Elizabeth Wilson, "Shostakovich composed the Festive Overture before my very eyes." The musicologist happened to be in Shostakovich's apartment when a desperate Nebolsin arrived with his request. Lebedinsky watched as the composer sat down to write the overture he had been commissioned to compose. Shostakovich continued talking to his friend and making jokes while he worked. As soon as he finished a page, a courier came and took it away to be copied, in an almost exact replay of how Rossini had written his famous overture to *La gazza ladra* ("The Thieving Magpie") in 1817.

Lebedinsky may have exaggerated in telling his story, but there is no doubt that Shostakovich was capable of working extremely quickly. Yet the quality of the musical ideas, and the craftsmanship with which they were developed, are such that no one would guess the composer had virtually no time to plan the piece. What Shostakovich achieved here is as close to improvisation as a symphonic composer can get: the conception and realization of the piece were virtually simultaneous.

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(Continued)

Of course, Shostakovich had the classical sonata-form model to fall back on: after an introductory fanfare, he duly presents his two themes. The first theme consists mainly of rapid eighth-note passages, while the second has an expressive, singing character. The subsequent development, recapitulation, and coda (which begins with a return of the opening fanfare) were all part of the traditional framework that Shostakovich could well take for granted, like so many composers before him. But the freshness of the materials that fill out that framework, the brilliant orchestration, and the effervescence of the whole piece are true signs of genius. They explain why the Festive Overture, originally written to help out a colleague in a pinch, has entered the standard repertoire and has held its place there ever since.

As we think of Shostakovich on the 50th anniversary of his death, we may remember that, through all the hardships he had to endure in the Soviet Union, his sense of humour was still frequently in evidence.

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“Men’s Dance” from the Opera Aleko (1892)

by Sergei Rachmaninoff
(Semyonovo, Russia, 1873 – Beverly Hills, California, 1943)

As graduation pieces go, Rachmaninoff’s one-act opera Aleko is in a class all by itself. The 19-year-old Rachmaninoff, who had entered the Moscow Conservatory at the tender age of 12, finished his studies with the highest honors in 1892, and his Aleko was premiered at the Bolshoy Theater with great success the same year. In this work, Rachmaninoff showed his complete mastery of the Romantic opera tradition of Glinka and Tchaikovsky—the latter having been his mentor and principal role model. The young musician revealed himself as a supreme melodist and a composer with a sure sense of harmony and a flawless command of the orchestra.

Like so many Russian operas, Aleko was based on a work by the great classic Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), in this case, the narrative poem The Gypsies (1824). This poem was a major influence on Prosper Mérimée (1803–1870), the author of the novella Carmen that served as the source for Bizet’s celebrated opera. (Mérimée translated Pushkin’s poem into French.) The protagonists of both works are Gypsy women who are champions of free love, unconstrained by conventional rules. Having become unfaithful to their lovers, who are not Gypsies, both are killed by the jealous men they have jilted.

Pushkin’s narrative poem was adapted as an opera libretto by Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko (1858–1943), the future founder of the Musical Theatre of the Moscow Art Theatre. Rachmaninoff composed and orchestrated the entire opera in an incredible eighteen days. The opera includes two dance numbers—one for the Gypsy women, the other for the men; we will hear the latter on this program. Just as Bizet used Spanish local color to represent Carmen and her world, Rachmaninoff portrayed his Gypsy men by writing melodies with a definite Russian-Gypsy flavor. After a somewhat clumsy and heavy-footed beginning, the dance gets more and more animated and ends with a brilliant flourish.

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Acts I and II from *Romeo & Juliet* (1935)

by Sergei Prokofiev
**(Sontsovka, Russian Empire [now Sontsivka, Ukraine],
1891 – Nikolina Gora, nr. Moscow, 1953)**

It was no mean feat to express the plot of the complex feelings of Shakespeare's immortal tragedy of the "star-crossed lovers" without a single word spoken or sung, only through dance and instrumental music. In his great ballet, Prokofiev rose to the challenge, depicting every situation and every character in a most gripping and personal manner.

It was Prokofiev's first major project, undertaken while returning to his native country after an absence of more than 15 years. The stakes were high: Prokofiev, the former expatriate, had to establish himself as a bona fide Soviet composer and reaffirm his international reputation on home soil. What he may not have realized when he allowed himself to be persuaded by the Soviets to return was the intense Party control to which he—like all creative artists, and indeed all citizens in the country—would be subjected.

Preparing for his permanent return (which took place in 1936), Prokofiev started negotiations about a new stage work for the Leningrad theater in the fall of 1934. The idea of *Romeo and Juliet* as a ballet came from dramaturg Adrian Piotrovsky (who, three years later, was shot during Stalin's infamous purges). The prominent stage director Sergei Radlov (who would spend eight years in a gulag after the end of World War II) collaborated with Piotrovsky and Prokofiev on the scenario. When the production failed to move ahead in Leningrad because of political infighting at the theater, the project was taken over by the Bolshoy Theater in Moscow. Yet when Prokofiev played through the finished score at the Bolshoy, it was not well received.

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As musicologist Simon Morrison writes in his 2009 book *The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years*: "The rhythmic writing occasioned general critique for its terseness, the harmonic and melodic writing for its anti-Romantic rationalism." To add insult to injury, in the first version, the story had a happy ending as the lovers did not die, and this outraged the purists. (Remembering these debates in 1941, Prokofiev commented: "The reasons for this bit of barbarism were purely choreographic: living people can dance, the dying cannot...") The ending had to be revised, and Shakespeare's tragic ending restored. All the same, and in spite of various efforts to make the classic drama conform to Soviet ideological requirements, the Bolshoy, too, cancelled plans to produce the ballet, which received its world premiere abroad (in Brno, Czechoslovakia), on December 30, 1938. Only after this international success did the Leningrad theater decide to perform the work. The house was under different management now; it had also changed its name from State Academic Theater of Opera and Ballet to Kirov Theater (previously, and now again, known as the Mariinsky Theater). The ballet finally opened there, after many more politically mandated revisions, on January 11, 1940.

At these concerts, the orchestra, joined by the dancers of the State Street Ballet, performs the first two acts of *Romeo and Juliet*. We will see and hear many of the most memorable moments of this iconic work, one of the most beloved ballets of the 20th-century repertoire.