KU Philharmonic Orchestra
Program Notes
Friday, November 20, 2026

Jacques Offenbach (1819–1880)
Can-Can from Orpheus in the Underworld

Jacques Offenbach's operetta Orpheus in the Underworld premiered in Paris in 1858 and quickly became one of his most celebrated works. Rather than treating the ancient Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice with solemnity, Offenbach transformed the story into a witty satire filled with comic situations, lively characters, and playful references to contemporary society. The operetta follows Orpheus into the Underworld as he attempts to retrieve Eurydice, though Offenbach humorously portrays their marriage as far from ideal.

The work's most famous music appears in the energetic Galop infernal, now commonly known as the "Can-Can." With its rapid tempo, driving rhythms, and instantly recognizable melody, the music captures the exuberant spirit of nineteenth-century Parisian entertainment. Originally associated with the wild celebration of the gods in the Underworld, the galop later became inseparable from the high-kicking can-can dance. Its brilliant orchestration, rhythmic excitement, and irrepressible humor make it one of Offenbach's most enduring and recognizable creations.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893)
Waltz from the Ballet "*The Sleeping Beauty*"
arr. Merle J. Isaac

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky composed The Sleeping Beauty in 1888–89, and the ballet received its premiere at the Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg in 1890. Based on the familiar fairy tale of Princess Aurora, the ballet tells a story of enchantment, an evil curse, a century-long sleep, and eventual awakening through love. Tchaikovsky considered the score one of his finest works, combining the elegance of classical ballet with his distinctive gift for memorable melody and colorful orchestration.

The famous Waltz appears early in the ballet during the celebration surrounding Princess Aurora's birthday. Graceful melodies unfold over the characteristic three-beat rhythm of the waltz, creating a sense of grandeur, elegance, and movement. Sweeping phrases and rich orchestral colors evoke both the formality of a royal celebration and the magical atmosphere of the fairy-tale world. The Waltz has since become one of the best-known excerpts from The Sleeping Beauty, capturing in just a few minutes the warmth, beauty, and theatrical imagination that distinguish Tchaikovsky's ballet music.

Leonard Bernstein (1918–1990)
Selections from West Side Story
arr. Jack Mason

Leonard Bernstein's West Side Story opened on Broadway in 1957 and remains one of the most influential works in American musical theater. Inspired by Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, the story moves the tragedy to 1950s New York City, where two rival street gangs—the Jets and the Sharks—struggle for territory and identity. At the center of the conflict are Tony and Maria, whose love offers the possibility of reconciliation but ultimately becomes caught in the violence surrounding them. Bernstein's score brings together the traditions of Broadway, jazz, Latin American dance music, and classical composition.

The orchestral selections capture the remarkable range of Bernstein's musical language, moving between driving rhythms, lyrical melodies, moments of tension, and vibrant dance music. Throughout West Side Story, rhythm plays a central role in defining both the excitement of New York City and the conflict between its characters, while some of Bernstein's most memorable melodies express tenderness, hope, and longing. Jack Mason's orchestral arrangement brings these contrasting musical worlds together, highlighting the energy, drama, and emotional depth that have made West Side Story an enduring classic of American music.