

Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*

Sergei Prokofiev

Today everybody would agree that Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the finest ballet scores of all time, but that was not the general consensus at the outset of its history. It is easy for us to hear it as supremely apt music for choreography, its memorable themes — by turns lyric and dramatic, always incisive and specific — so filled with movement that they seem the very embodiment of the dance. How puzzling it is to be reminded that the dancers of the Bolshoi Ballet, preparing for a Russian premiere that would be repeatedly delayed, complained bitterly about Prokofiev's score, dismissing it as “undanceable!”

Romeo and Juliet was a joint project of Prokofiev and Sergei Radlov, a modernist stage director who had overseen the Russian premiere of Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges* in 1926. Apart from his work with avant-garde plays, Radlov was also noted for his daring productions of Shakespeare, including, in 1934, a Russian staging of *Romeo and Juliet*. In 1935 he crafted a scenario of 58 episodes of roughly equal length based on Shakespeare's play about Romeo Montague and Juliet Capulet, the idealistic young lovers whose passion is doomed by the animosity of their feuding families.

Prokofiev was officially living in Paris when he composed this

ballet. He would move back to his native country in January 1936, but during the preceding year he actually spent more time in Russia than elsewhere, and the chief project that occupied him during those months was this ballet. He passed much of the year at a resort town on the Oka River, where many artists associated with the Bolshoi Theatre spent their time off. He wrote to a friend:

I am enjoying this peace and quiet. I swim in the Oka, play tennis and chess, go for walks in the forests with our ballerinas, do some reading, and work for about five hours a day. ... I am not resting so much as writing *Romeo*.

Romeo and Juliet had been envisioned originally for the Mariinsky Theatre in Leningrad, but political turmoil caused plans to change and the premiere was rescheduled to take place at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. However, that production also failed to take form. With frustration mounting, Prokofiev created an orchestral suite from his completed ballet score and unveiled it in

In Short

Born: either April 23 (according to his own report) or April 27 (according to his birth certificate), 1891, in Sontsovska (now called Krasnoye), Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Nikolina Gora, near Moscow

Work composed: 1935–36

World premiere: the complete ballet, on December 30, 1938, in Brno, Czechoslovakia, Quirino Arnoldi conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: selections were first performed March 21, 1943, Efrem Kurtz, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: selections were last performed July 23, 2008, Bramwell Tovey, conductor, at the Bravo! Vail Valley Music Festival in Vail, Colorado

Estimated duration: ca. 44 minutes

November 1936, two years before the ballet reached the stage. As it happened, *Romeo and Juliet* received its first performances not in Russia but rather in Czechoslovakia and only later made its way to Russia — first to Leningrad (in 1940, with the Kirov Ballet) and eventually to Moscow (in December 1946), where the members of the Bolshoi Ballet company were finally convinced that the music was not “undanceable” after all.

In their original scenario, Prokofiev and Radlov made a major change to Shakespeare’s plot: they arranged for Romeo to arrive just before Juliet takes poison, so that the young lovers do not die but rather live happily ever after — a twist that doubtless would have been met with pleasure by the Soviet cultural authorities, who liked nothing more than optimism. Still, “There was quite a fuss about our attempt to give *Romeo and*

Juliet a happy ending,” the composer later recalled. He explained:

The reason for this bit of barbarism was purely choreographic: the living can dance, the dying cannot. ... After several conferences with the choreographer, it was found that the tragic ending could be expressed in dance after all, and in due course the music for that ending was written.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contra-bassoon, tenor saxophone, four horns, two trumpets and cornet, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drums, cymbals, bass drum, orchestra bells, xylophone, harp, piano (doubling celesta), and strings.

“The Author of My Favorite Ballets”

The ballerina Galina Ulanova, who interpreted the role of Juliet (whom she cited as her favorite heroine) in the 1940 Kirov production of Prokofiev’s *Romeo and Juliet*, recalled the composer in an essay titled “The Author of My Favorite Ballets,” dated April 16, 1954:

I do not remember exactly when I first saw Prokofiev; I only know that at some point during the rehearsals of *Romeo and Juliet* I became aware of the presence in the hall of a tall, somewhat stern-looking man who seemed to disapprove heartily of everything he saw and especially of our artists. It was Prokofiev. ... Time was flying, the rehearsals were in full swing, but we were still badly hampered by the unusual orchestration and the chamber quality of the music. The frequent change of rhythm, too, gave us a great deal of trouble. To tell the truth, we were not accustomed to such music; in fact we were a little afraid of it. ... We did not tell Prokofiev anything of this; we were afraid of him. ... Prokofiev seemed unapproachable and haughty, and we felt he had no faith in ballet or in ballet artists. This last hurt our feelings deeply. Youth and professional pride prevented us from realizing that Prokofiev had grounds for distrusting the ballet theatre, for he had had bad luck with his ballets — not one of those he had written prior to *Romeo and Juliet* had survived. ... Gradually that air of chill aloofness we had so much resented at first disappeared. He began to listen to our remarks with increasing interest and attention, and before long a sympathy which soon turned to warm and genuine affection sprang up between the ballet dancers and the composer.



Galina Ulanova as Juliet and Mikhail Gabovich as Romeo in the 1946 Bolshoi Ballet production of *Romeo and Juliet*