The History in This Program

Americans were fascinated by Sergei Prokofiev. As a piano soloist, he beguiled audiences with quicksilver virtuosity; as a composer, he baffled them with his avant-garde works. Fleeing the political tumult of the Russian Revolution, he lived in New York City from 1918 to 1922, and made his New York Philharmonic debut on February 11, 1920, performing Rimsky-Korsakov's Piano Concerto. (The concert, led by Music Director Josef Stransky, was a benefit for the Save-A-Home Fund, which helped pay rent for families facing illness and unemployment.) It would be two more years before New York audiences would hear one of Prokofiev's own symphonic works, when he performed his Piano Concerto No. 3 with the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928.)

The composer was a consistently crowd-pleasing soloist, even if his own music sometimes met with a mixed response. In November 1925 his Violin Concerto No. 1 was included in a New York Symphony matinee program cheekily titled "Modern Music: Pleasant and Unpleasant." Conductor Walter Damrosch memorably quipped to the audience that the human ear "is like the back of a donkey: if you whip it enough it becomes insensible to pain!" Meanwhile, whenever *The New York Times* critic Olin Downes praised Prokofiev's works, a disclaimer often followed. When Prokofiev performed with the New York Philharmonic for the last time, in January 1933, again playing his Piano Concerto No. 3, Downes seemed conflicted as he mused on the multi-talented musician:

> One still wonders what on earth Serge Prokofiev will evolve into. … He is a born virtuoso. He appears to be a temperament and a mind very symptomatic of this age. He is also a very gifted composer, but of what category and what future?

Indeed, Prokofiev could have easily pursued a lucrative career as an international virtuoso. However, unsettled by the Great Depression and eager to focus on composition, he returned to his homeland — now the Soviet Union — permanently in 1936. Four years later he was engaged to return to the Philharmonic as a guest conductor for an ongoing "conductor-composers" series. When visa troubles prevented him from attending, his contemporary Igor Stravinsky, who had remained in the United States, appeared in his stead.

— The Archives

To learn more, visit the **New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives** at archives.nyphil.org.

Prokofiev, an avid chess player, ca. 1930

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

When the Bolshevik Revolution hit, Sergei Prokofiev decided to ride out the storm elsewhere. In May 1918 he left Russia for what he figured would be a few months, but 18 years would pass before he moved back to his homeland. An early stop in his cosmopolitan wandering was Chicago, where Frederick Stock led the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in his Piano Concerto No. 1 (with the composer as soloist) and the *Scythian Suite*.

The catalyst for these performances was Cyrus McCormick, the farm-equipment baron and new-music enthusiast who had met Prokofiev in 1917 in Petrograd. McCormick introduced Prokofiev to the movers and shakers of Chicago's cultural scene, including Cleofonte Campanini, director of the Chicago Grand Opera, who commissioned a new opera from the young composer. By January 1919 a contract was signed for ***The Love for Three Oranges,*** its subject growing out of a published Russian adaptation by the director Vsevelod Meyerhold of a *commedia*

Suite from *The Love for Three Oranges*, Op. 33a

Sergei Prokofiev

Born: April 23, 1891 — so he maintained, though his birth certificate said April 27 — in Sontsovka, in the Ekaterinoslav district of Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow, USSR

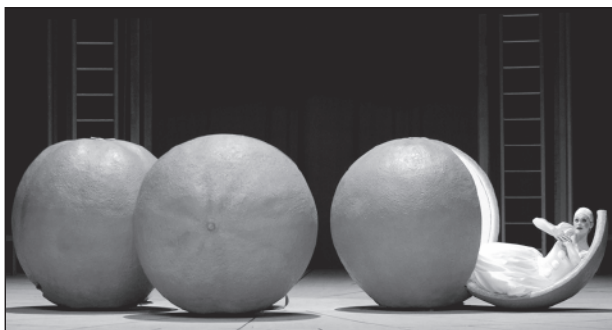
Work composed: The opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*, composed in 1919; premiered December 30, 1921, by the Chicago Grand Opera, with the composer conducting; the Suite was crafted (with some new material) December 1921 through 1924

World premiere: The opera, premiered December 30, 1921, by the Chicago Grand Opera, with the composer conducting; the suite premiered November 29, 1925, in Paris, with Philippe Gaubert conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: selections (March and Scherzo), premiered July 26, 1928, Albert Coates, conductor; complete suite, premiered October 10, 1974, Pierre Boulez, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: selections (March and Scherzo), July 3, 2010, at the Bethel Woods Center for the Arts, Bethel Woods, New York, Bramwell Tovey, conductor; complete suite, February 9, 1999, Valery Gergiev, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 20 minutes



Scene from the 2005 Paris National Opera production of The Love for Three Oranges

dell'arte tale by the 18th-century Venetian playwright Carlo Gozzi. Prokofiev recalled:

> The play, with its mixture of fairytale, humor and satire, had a strong appeal for me, and during the long journey [to America] I had even sketched a plan of sorts in my mind.

He finished the new opera in June 1919 and turned in the completely orchestrated score by October 1, as stipulated in his contract. Prokofiev reported:

> Everything was going splendidly when Campanini died suddenly in December, and the theatre, afraid to continue with the production without him, postponed it until the following season. I was left high and dry without the opera and with no concerts to speak of.

The composer therefore headed to London and Paris, where he consulted with Serge Diaghilev about a revival of his ballet *Chout*. Back in America in the autumn of 1920, Prokofiev picked a fight with the Chicago Grand Opera by demanding compensation for the year's delay. The interim director refused to concede, and the opera again failed to make it into the season's offerings. Not until the end of 1921 did the long-planned production come to fruition, when the new executive director, retired soprano Mary Garden, acquiesced to the composer's demands and, moreover, promised as many rehearsals as he desired.

Set in 11 scenes unrolling over a Prologue and four acts, *The Love for Three Oranges* boasts a very complicated, borderline absurdist plot that involves a depressed prince who eventually is united with his longed-for princess, one of three fairy princesses who emerge from enormous oranges (hence the work's title). For all its bizarre modernity, *The Love for Three Oranges* was also playful, charming, and ironic, and it did not skimp on

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The Work at a Glance

The music of "Ridiculous Fellows" (also known as "Eccentrics"), is drawn from the Prologue of ***The Love for Three Oranges***, in which theatrical types (tragedians, comedians, lyricists, etc.) fight over the story that is about to unfold. The opera opens with the melancholic Prince and a card game between the magician Tchelio (protector of the King of Clubs) and Fata Morgana (a witch, his rival); this provides the music for the second section of the suite. Efforts to cheer up the Prince include an entertainment in which the March gets its first of several airings.

Fata Morgana infects the Prince with a curse: he will yearn passionately for three oranges and will travel far away to seek them. The Scherzo accompanies a violent wind that launches the Prince and his jester on their journey. In a distant desert, they indeed discover three huge oranges. Each contains a princess, but the first two who emerge die of thirst. The third survives — beautiful Princess Ninetta. The Suite's fifth movement, "The Prince and the Princess," conflates music from this desert-thirst and love scene. Complications ensue before the characters flee the dramatic chaos that has accumulated ("Flight"), leaving the Prince and Princess together — and alone at last.

Fata Morgana, as illustrated by Maurice Sendak for a 1982 Glyndebourne Festival production of The Love for Three Oranges

opportunities for brilliant stagecraft. Prokofiev wrote:

> The premiere on December 30, 1921 brought a full house and on the face of it was a big success. The Chicagoans were both proud and embarrassed to be presenting a "modernist premiere" which, according to the newspapers, had already cost some 250,000 dollars.

Already in late 1919 Prokofiev had begun making piano transcriptions of selections from his opera, and he noted in his diary that "later perhaps I shall also make an orchestral version." In November 1921 he picked up on the idea again: "While *Oranges* is still fresh in my mind I must make a concert suite from it, or at least draw up a plan for one." By that December 19, with the opera's premiere looming, he wrote:

> Taking advantage of the fact that there is no rehearsal today and my leisure is continuing, I made plans for an orchestral suite from *Three Oranges* and thought out the whole work. The first number I cut and pasted from fragments, and I shall do the same for the "Conspiracy," [Infernal Scene] "The Prince and the Princess." The other three numbers can be lifted more or less straight from the opera. The amount of work entailed is not great; all I need is the will to do it and a clear head, and then I'll have to find a copyist and get him to transcribe the movements.

Marching Along

The big hit from ***The Love for Three Oranges*** is the March. It ascended to pop-culture stardom in the United States as the theme song for the CBS radio crime drama *The FBI in Peace and War*, which was broadcast from 1944 through 1958. By then it had long since become a sort of theme song for Prokofiev himself. Already in January 1927, it figured in the proceedings when he returned for his first visit to the USSR after nearly a decade's absence, under the aegis of the group known as Persimfans, from the Russian acronym for First Conductorless Symphony Ensemble. Prokofiev chronicled the moment in his *Autobiography*:

> On January 18, I stepped on Soviet soil at Bigosovo, and on the 19th I arrived in Moscow. How can I describe my feelings on returning to my native land! I was met by the Persimfans people and driven in a car with frost-coated windows straight to the Metropole Hotel where I found many old friends awaiting me . . . . I went to a rehearsal of the orchestra. As we approached the hall I heard the March from the *Three Oranges* being played. "They are taking it a little too slow," I said, thinking they were rehearsing it, but it turned out that the orchestra was playing the March in my honor.

Prokofiev's **Violin Concerto No. 1** dates from the fateful moment when the composer was about to leave Russia. World War I was reaching its end, but while most of Europe would breathe a sigh of relief, Russia would descend into increasing anarchy, paving the way for the Russian Revolution. Prokofiev was obviously concerned by what was happening around him but his creative spirit seems not to have diminished. In 1917 he completed not only his First Violin Concerto but also his First Symphony (the *Classical*), the Third and Fourth Piano Sonatas, and the *Visions fugitives* for Piano.

The origins of his Violin Concerto No. 1 can be traced to a Concertino for Violin that Prokofiev had begun in 1915 but left incomplete. Some of the material for that earlier work ended up in the concerto, which in any case adheres to modest proportions. (It retained its deceptively early Opus No. 19 from the projected Concertino.)

It was supposed to be premiered by the famed Polish violinist Paweł Kochański, who was teaching in St. Petersburg (by then renamed Petrograd). But with the turmoil in Russia, not to mention Prokofiev's departure for foreign soil, plans for the performance failed to progress. The premiere was delayed until 1923, when Serge Koussevitzky (by then a Russian expatriate in Paris, just like Prokofiev) programmed it on his own concert series, with his orchestra's concertmaster, Marcel Darrieux, as the adequate but hardly brilliant soloist.

Curiously, the Soviet premiere took place a mere three days later: an undoubtedly stellar performance with piano accompaniment (rather than orchestra) featuring two 19-year-old musicians just at the beginning of their careers, the violinist Nathan Milstein and the pianist Vladimir Horowitz. But it was the Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti who became the most ardent early champion of this work, playing it all over the world, making the first recording, and writing poetically of "its mixture of fairy-tale naïveté and daring savagery in lay-out and texture."

Paris critics rebuffed this concerto at first — a special disappointment to the composer since it was the first of his compositions he had unveiled since settling in that city. The Parisians had proved receptive to Prokofiev's extroverted "bad-boy" scores of the time, such as the *Scythian Suite* and the ballet *The Buffoon* (or *Chout*), but they didn't hide their disappointment over this considerably less confrontational score. The Violin Concerto No. 1 stood apart with its inherent lyricism and sparkling virtuosity — an almost Romantic concerto arriving late on the scene.

In his so-called "Short Autobiography" (1941), Prokofiev identified five separate strands in his musical language, which he termed the classical, the modern, the toccata, the lyrical, and — with some strings attached — the "scherzo-ish." He related the Violin Concerto No. 1 principally to the lyric strand of his style:

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major, Op. 19

Sergei Prokofiev

Work composed: summer of 1917

World premiere: October 18, 1923, in Paris, Serge Koussevitzky, conductor, Marcel Darrieux, soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: November 29, 1925, with Walter Damrosch conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928)

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: April 7, 2017, in Copenhagen, Denmark, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Frank Peter Zimmermann, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 21 minutes

Prokofiev in 1918

The fourth line is lyrical: it appears first as a thoughtful and meditative mood, not always associated with melody, or at any rate with long melody … For a long time I was given no credit for any lyrical gift whatever, and for want of encouragement it developed slowly. But as time went on I gave more attention to this aspect of my work.

Prokofiev's ballet ***Romeo and Juliet*** is now considered one of the finest ballet scores of all time, but that was not the consensus at the outset of its history. It is easy for one to hear it as supremely apt music for choreography, with 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 director who had staged 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 Shakespearean works, 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 not, and the chief project that occupied him during those months was *Romeo and Juliet*. 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*.

In the Composer's Words

Prokofiev's close friend and fellow composer Nikolai Miaskovsky reported back to him about a performance of the **Violin Concerto No. 1** given in Moscow on October 19, 1924, by Joseph Szigeti, with the conductor Alexander Khessin. Prokofiev's response provides some insights into this work:

Thanks for sharing your extremely interesting impressions of the orchestral performance of my Violin Concerto. In my arrogance I can't help thinking that many of your reproaches can be blamed, however, on insufficient rehearsing by the orchestra and the second-class quality of the conductor. The straining tuba, the bleating trumpet, the fading violas — all these are the symptoms of one disease: a poorly balanced orchestra. This concerto is orchestrated in such a way that if the sonorities of the various sections are not balanced, the result is only God knows what. Koussevitzky achieved this balance — under his baton the violas played their theme through to the end, and the trumpets sounded as if from a distance, and the tuba emerged like an endearing bumpkin. When I heard the same concerto under a French conductor, I almost fled from the hall. I took the score, looked it all over, and didn't find a single thing that should be changed. Actually, I did make one change, something that you mention in your letter: at the end I added passages for the clarinet and flute, because without some sort of divertissement like that, it sounded painfully similar to the overture from *Lohengrin!*

Romeo and Juliet had been envisioned for the Mariinsky Theatre in Leningrad, but political turmoil had changed plans such that the premiere was rescheduled to take place at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow. That production also failed to take form. With frustration mounting, Prokofiev created an orchestral suite from his completed ballet score and unveiled it in November 1936, two years before the ballet reached the stage. A further suite soon followed, and a third in 1946. In the event, *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 the original scenario, Prokofiev and Radlov made a major change to the Shakespearean plot: they arranged for Romeo to arrive just before Juliet ingests poison, with the result that the young lovers do not die but rather live happily ever after — a twist that should have met with pleasure from the Soviet cultural authorities, who liked nothing more than optimism. The composer later recalled:

> There was quite a fuss about our attempt to give *Romeo and Juliet* a happy ending. The reason for this bit of barbarism was purely choreographic: the living can dance, the dying cannot. … Curiously,

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Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*

Sergei Prokofiev

Work composed: 1935–36

World premiere: The ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, premiered December 30, 1938, in Brno, Czechoslovakia, Quirino Arnoldi, conductor. Music of *Romeo and Juliet* had already been performed in two concert suites Prokofiev assembled in late 1936, containing seven movements each. The first suite was premiered on November 24, 1936, at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, with Georges Sébastian conducting; the second on April 15, 1937 by the Leningrad Philharmonic, with Evgeni Mravinsky conducting. In 1946 Prokofiev created a six-movement Suite No. 3 from music not used in the earlier suites (including "The Death of Juliet"); it was premiered March 8, 1946, in Moscow, with Vladimir Degtyarenko conducting.

New York Philharmonic premiere: Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*, March 31, 1943, Efrem Kurtz, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*, April 26, 2014, Andrew Davis, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 37 minutes

Scene from a 2010 Royal Swedish Ballet production of Romeo and Juliet

In Rehearsal

The ballerina Galina Ulanova, who first danced the role of Juliet (which she cited as her favorite heroine) in the 1940 Kirov production, recalled Prokofiev 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. That feeling was all the more precious for having weathered the stormiest periods in the relations between the representatives of two interrelated arts who had begun by fearing they would never be able to understand each other.

Galina Ulanova (top) as Juliet, and with Yury Zhdanov, as Romeo, in a 1954 Bolshoi Ballet production of Romeo and Juliet

From Ballet to Orchestral Suites

Frustrated in getting his ***Romeo and Juliet*** ballet produced, Prokofiev decided to introduce some of its music to the public as stand-alone orchestral works. In late 1936 he put together two concert suites, published under the rubrics Op. 64bis and Op. 64ter (Op. 64 being the identifier for the complete ballet). They proved immediately popular and remain to this day among his most frequently programmed scores. In 1946 Prokofiev produced yet another suite (labeled Op. 101), which is less frequently heard.

For these performances, conductor Stéphane Denève has assembled an original sequence that draws on material from all three of Prokofiev's suites and from the ballet score. From the composer's Suite No. 1 come Minuet, "Masks," "Romeo and Juliet (Balcony Scene)," and "The Death of Tybalt." The music for "Montagues and Capulets," here divided into two segments, "The Prince's Order" and "Dance of the Knights," is drawn from the ballet score. Suite No. 2 furnished "The Child Juliet," "Friar Laurence," and "Romeo at the Tomb of Juliet." Immediately following the latter comes "The Death of Juliet," included in his Suite No. 3.

> while the report that Prokofiev was writing a *Romeo and Juliet* ballet with a happy ending was received quite calmly in London, our own [Russian] Shakespeare scholars proved more Catholic than the Pope and rushed to the playwright's defense. But what really caused me to change my mind about the whole thing was a remark someone made to me. "Your music does not express real joy at the end." That was quite true. 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: Suite from *The Love for Three Oranges* calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, tubular bells, xylophone, two harps, and strings. Violin Concerto No. 1 employs two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, tuba, timpani, tambourine, military drum, harp, and strings, in addition to the solo violin. Selections from *Romeo and Juliet* calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets and cornet, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, tambourine, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, xylophone, piano (doubling celeste), harp, and strings.