

Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*, Suites Nos. 1 and 2

Sergei Prokofiev

Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the finest ballet scores of all time, but that was not the general consensus at the outset. It is easy for today's listeners to hear it as supremely apt 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 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 and he would move back to his native country in January 1936. However, during the preceding year he actually spent more time in Russia than not, 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 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 followed

In Short

Born: April 23, 1891, in Sontsovka, Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow, USSR

Work composed: 1935–36

World premiere: the complete ballet, December 30, 1938, in Brno, Czechoslovakia, Quirino Arnoldi, conductor. The composer had previously assembled two concert suites, containing seven movements each: the First was premiered on November 24, 1936, at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, with Georges Sébastian conducting, and the Second on April 15, 1937, in Leningrad, with Evgeni Mravinsky conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic. (Some sources state that Prokofiev conducted the premieres.)

New York Philharmonic premiere: music from both suites was first heard on March 21, 1943, Efrem Kurtz, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: January 27, 2018, Stéphane Denève, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 40 minutes

fast on its heels, 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 Shake-

sperean 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. However, Prokofiev 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

From Ballet to Orchestral Suites

Frustrated in getting his *Romeo and Juliet* ballet produced, Prokofiev decided to introduce some of its music 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.

Jaap van Zweden has assembled an original sequence that draws on material from the first two of Prokofiev’s suites. The movements *Minuet*, *Masks*, and *The Death of Tybalt* are drawn from the First; *The Montagues and the Capulets*, *The Child Juliet*, *Dance of the Five Couples*, *Romeo and Juliet Before Parting*, *Dance of the Girls with Lilies*, and *Romeo at the Tomb of Juliet* are from

the Second. They flow in an order selected by Maestro van Zweden for its musical logic, rather than for how they fall in the complete ballet.



Prokofiev with his family in 1935, the time he was composing *Romeo and Juliet*

was purely choreographic: the living can dance, the dying cannot. ... Curiously, 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: 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, snare drum, cymbals, bass drum, triangle, orchestra bells, tambourine, maracas, xylophone, piano (doubling celesta), two harps, and strings.

Listen for . . . the Girls with Lilies, from *Antilles*?

The seventh of the *Romeo and Juliet* selections played here, the *Dance of the Girls with Lilies*, falls near the end of the ballet. Juliet, about to be married off to Count Paris (though she has secretly wed Romeo), has ingested a sleeping potion that makes her appear dead. Six girls arrive bearing lilies in honor of the wedding day, but they are unable to awaken her — a critical step leading to the work's tragic conclusion.

Originally, these were called *Girls from Antilles*, although the 1935 scenario also referred to them as being Syrian. Whether they were Caribbean or Middle Eastern, it seems the idea was that they were exotic — hence their sinuous music (*Andante con eleganza*), underpinned by tambourine and maracas. The 1940 production choreographed by Leonid Lavrovsky for the Kirov Ballet in St. Petersburg apparently marked the moment when *Girls from Antilles* transmogrified into *Girls with Lilies*. It is a curious bit of confusion — the more so since the words don't sound similar in Russian — and one may still encounter the movement's title in either form.



Galina Ulanova, who had originated the role of Juliet in Prokofiev's ballet, with Yuri Zhdanov as Romeo, in 1955