

## Sergey PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

Romeo and Juliet: Suite No. 2 Op. 64b [1937]

- I Montagues and Capulets
  - II The Young Juliet
  - III Friar Laurence
  - IV Dance
  - V Romeo at Juliet's Before Parting
  - VI Dance of the Antilles Girls
  - VII Romeo at the Grave of Juliet Suite No. 1 Op. 64a [1936]
- VII Death of Tybalt

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Romeo and Juliet was Prokofiev's first major work upon his return to the Soviet Union from Paris in 1935. Stalin instigated its commission in an attempt to lure Prokofiev back behind the Iron Curtain. The ballet's production history is almost as dramatic as the play on which it was based.

The idea of adapting Shakespeare's tragic love story for the ballet stage was suggested to Prokofiev by Sergei Radlov, who had staged the Russian premiere of Prokofiev's opera *The Love for Three Oranges* in Leningrad in 1926. At the time Radlov was the artistic director of the Kirov Ballet, for whom the commission was intended. All this was rescinded, however, when Sergei Kirov, a powerful official in the Communist establishment, was assassinated in his office. The resulting shift in power, which ultimately displaced Radlov, led to the rejection of Prokofiev's commission, which was taken up by the Bolshoi in Moscow.

The ballet's production was marred by artistic complications as well. The dancers proclaimed the music 'undanceable', and demanded extensive rewrites. In addition - and perhaps more sensibly - the dancers also took issue with Prokofiev's ending for the ballet. He envisioned a rose-coloured conclusion to the otherwise tragic tale, with Romeo arriving in the nick of time to save his beloved from certain death. Fortunately, the ballet's choreographers managed to dissuade him, and the play was given its appropriately tragic coda.

Prokofiev, perhaps fearing that a ballet performance would never see the light of day, forged three suites from his original score. Although none of them really attempts to maintain any sense of the ballet's narrative, they each contain the work's characteristic musical portraits, neoclassical dance movements, and dramatic set-pieces.

The subject matter of the play was well suited to Prokofiev's particular talents; his music is always coloured by an innate lyricism, present even in his most abstract compositions. In adapting *Romeo and Juliet* - Shakespeare's greatest representation of romantic love - we see this lyrical genius given free reign. Conventionally diatonic (save for the occasional deft harmonic sidestep), the melodies in *Romeo and Juliet* are among Prokofiev's most memorable.

But *Romeo and Juliet* is more than a string of endlessly hummable tunes. The work contains Prokofiev's greatest depiction of dramatic character, present in the palpable mutual loathing of The Montagues and the Capulets, the exuberance of *The Young Juliet* (a spritely orchestral vivace), the comic introspections of Friar Laurence (played aptly by the bassoon), and the brassy braggadocio of Mercutio (which opens *The Death of Tybalt*). Prokofiev evokes the world of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and invites us to revel in all its rich diversity.

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