



PROGRAM

PROKOFIEV

**Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*,
Op. 64**

Montagues and Capulets

Juliet the Young Girl

Minuet

Masks

Balcony Scene

Tybalt's Death

Romeo and Juliet Before Parting

Romeo at Juliet's Tomb

2022-23 Sunday Matinees

ROMEO & JULIET

Sunday, Feb. 5 @ 3 p.m.

Carl St.Clair, conductor
Pacific Symphony

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*Performance at the Segerstrom Center for the Arts
Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall*

PROGRAM NOTES

Sergei Prokofiev

Selections from *Romeo and Juliet*

Born: April 23, 1891, in Sontsivka, Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, Moscow, Russia

Composed: 1935

Premiered: December 30, 1938 in Brno, Czechoslovakia

Most recent Pacific Symphony

performance: April 18, 2015 in the Renée and Henry Segerstrom Concert Hall with Carl St.Clair conducting

Instrumentation: three flutes including piccolo, three oboes including English horn, three clarinets including bass clarinet, three bassoons including contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, one tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, piano, celesta, tenor sax, and strings

Estimated duration: Approximately 48 minutes

Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* is the most popular, enduring and influential of all love stories—a sweeping claim and difficult to prove, but also irrefutable common sense. This tragic romance gives us the world's paradigmatic “star-crossed lovers,” a phrase that originates in Shakespeare's prologue to the play. Musicologists tell us that there are about 75 versions of Romeo and Juliet's story in the opera literature alone (with only those by Bellini and Gounod in the standard repertory). In ballet, Prokofiev's setting stands apart as the great musical narrative of the story, but Tchaikovsky's tone poem, condensed and moody, is also effective when danced. These quintessential young lovers have invaded every form and style of art. No genre is exempt—not even rock, which gave us Bob Hamilton and Freddie Gorman's song “Just Like Romeo and Juliet,” a hit single for The Reflections in 1964.

Like those of his compatriots Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky, Prokofiev's great ballet scores work as abstract music in the concert hall without the benefit of dance or text. But just a glance at the names of the dances is enough to remind us of Prokofiev's greatness as a storyteller; the music compels us with the ebbs and flows of the unseen story as well as its sheer beauty. Prokofiev's narrative powers can come as a bit of a shock to some American listeners; the quirks of history have tended to fragment our view of his talents, especially during the Cold War.

Born in 1891, the prodigiously gifted Prokofiev earned a reputation as something of a musical firebrand early in life. Just a year after beginning his formal music training at age 11 with the eminent Ukrainian-born composer



Reinhold Glière, he entered the Moscow Conservatory; his written recollections of this period, as well as his early compositions, suggest that Prokofiev was not a troublemaker, but possessed a musical mind that was questing and eager to experiment with new trends in tonality, harmony, and rhythm. In his “Classical” Symphony, written when he was 25, we hear both his mastery of the past (it is considered an homage to Haydn) and his eagerness for the future. By then, Prokofiev had already earned a reputation as a rising young composer. He had signed a contract with the music publisher Boris P. Jurgenson five years earlier, and at age 22 had traveled to London and Paris. Nine years younger than Stravinsky, he met Stravinsky's patron Diaghilev in London and composed several short ballet scores for him; the following year, Stravinsky's association with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes would catapult the older composer to international notoriety after the Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring*.

The music of Prokofiev and Shostakovich and their relationship with the Soviet cultural apparatus had to be reconsidered when Shostakovich's shocking (and possibly spurious) memoir, *Testimony*, was spirited into the West and published in translation by a colleague of Shostakovich's, the musicologist Solomon Volkov, in 1979. The controversy surrounding this volume forced us to reevaluate all 20th-century Russian music, not just Shostakovich's. It was like discovering three Prokofievs: the master of the piano who wrote some of the most important piano concertos and sonatas of the 20th century; the sophisticated, lapidary symphonist; and the theatrical composer whose riveting narrative compositions—such as the ballets *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella* and the operas *War and Peace*, *The Gambler*, *The Love for Three Oranges*—are acknowledged for their greatness, but rarely seen on American stages. Since its premiere in 1936, Prokofiev's charming *Peter and the Wolf* has been presented in the U.S. far more often than any of his other works.

Musicologists are puzzled as to why Prokofiev was allowed to travel so freely, and why he chose to return. And while there is plenty of background commentary to analyze, most of it fails to consider the depth of the attachment that Russian artists seem to feel for their homeland; all too often, if they cannot be happy there, neither can they be happy anywhere else. For us, in listening to *Romeo and Juliet*, Prokofiev's travels in the early 1920s crucially gave him experience to draw upon in composing this ballet score more than a decade later. He completed most of it in 1935. The ballet was composed based on a synopsis by Adrian Piotrovsky and Sergey Radlov.

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One reason for the stunning effectiveness of the *Romeo and Juliet* score is Prokofiev's superb mastery in balancing lyricism and tension. The melodic appeal, the romanticism, and the sensuality of young love never flag throughout the ballet. Yet there is a sense of foreboding and darkness, too—Prokofiev vividly evokes Verona's foreboding atmosphere, dominated by feuding dynasties, with violence always near at hand. Love is vividly evoked, but so are chases and duels.

It might have wound up a bit less dark, but things did not go exactly as planned for the composer. As work proceeded on *Romeo and Juliet*, the Soviet government's tyrannical mediation of staged musical events could not have been more ominous to its creators. Their original scenario included a happy ending—a departure from Shakespeare's original story line that may have been invented on the tenuous assumption that love's triumph would be deemed more beneficial to the Soviet people than tragedy and death. The atmosphere was tense in anticipation of the ballet's eventual staging, and led to Radlov's departure from the Kirov Ballet in 1934. When

a new agreement was reached for a production at the Moscow's Bolshoi Theatre, the closest thing to a state concert hall, even the scenario's happy ending provoked controversy among government's artistic watchdogs.

In 1936, when the famous Pravda editorials condemning Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* were published, the tensions rose still further. The music historian Joseph Horowitz has reconstructed concert programs that include the original score, with Romeo and Juliet joyfully reunited. Whether this approach is as convincing as the more familiar tragic ending is up to the individual listener. In his autobiography, Prokofiev notes:

There was quite a fuss at the time about our attempts to give *Romeo and Juliet* a happy ending...the reasons for this bit of barbarism were purely choreographic: living people can dance, the dying cannot. But what really caused me to change my mind about the whole thing was a remark someone made to me about the ballet: "Strictly speaking, your music does not express any real joy at the end." That was quite true. After several conferences with the choreographers, it was found that the tragic ending could be expressed in the dance and in due time the music for that ending was written.

Not until 1938 was the ballet finally premiered in Brno, Czechoslovakia—without fanfare, but now recomposed with a tragic ending that conforms more closely to Shakespeare's. The Russian premiere was held at the Kirov Theater in 1940.

Listeners will recognize Prokofiev's now-familiar rhythmic pliancy and the vivid, almost visceral physicality of this music, along with a plangent sound that makes it sound antique, modern and timeless all at once. His inclusion of unexpected instruments, combining the old and the new—tenor saxophone, cornet, viola d'amore, mandolin—creates an aural curtain that hangs like a palace tapestry.

The legendary Russian ballerina Galina Ulanova, who created the role of Juliet, commented in her memoirs that at the time they were learning the choreography, the love music in *Romeo and Juliet* did not seem romantic to the dancers. To modern listeners, there is no more compelling representation of love's realities, its physical ardor and emotional torment, than this ballet. The balcony scene is one of the most romantic moments in music—Prokofiev's uncanny musical rendition of the line "It is the East, and Juliet is the sun." The upward phrases evoke Romeo's desperate reach for the light just beyond his grasp. It is an embodiment of every lover's longing.



MONUMENT TO COMPOSER SERGEI PROKOFIEV IN MOSCOW, RUSSIA.

Michael Clive is a cultural reporter living in the Litchfield Hills of Connecticut. He is program annotator for Pacific Symphony and Louisiana Philharmonic, and editor-in-chief for *The Santa Fe Opera*.