

MUSIC NOTE

Never was a tale of greater woe than Prokofiev's music to Romeo

Galina Ulanova

The intrigue surrounding Sergei Prokofiev's attempts to mount a ballet version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* is the stuff of legend. Prokofiev's difficulties began when, in 1934 and before a note was even written, the newly politicised Kirov Ballet of Leningrad (St Petersburg) terminated his commission for a new ballet. The Kirov's decision followed the fall from political grace of its director, the avant-garde choreographer Sergei Radlov, with whom Prokofiev was collaborating. The Ballet was undoubtedly also uneasy at the prospect of staging a work whose tragic ending was out of step with the ruthlessly enforced optimism of Stalinism's socialist regime.

Cast adrift by the Kirov, Prokofiev and Radlov signed a contract with the Bolshoi Theatre in 1935 and set about the challenge of translating the complex dramatic layers of Shakespeare's original text into music and dance. Employing a technique not dissimilar to the Wagnerian leitmotif, Prokofiev used themes and motifs to represent the emotional and dramatic development of specific characters and events. He composed the piano score quickly during the summer and autumn of 1935 at the Bolshoi's rural retreat, and was making rapid progress with the orchestration when he returned to Moscow to play the score to the Bolshoi's staff. To his dismay its directors promptly declared it 'undanceable'. History tells us that the verdict probably had more to do with politics than the music itself.

Prokofiev was in a bind with regard to Shakespeare's tragic ending. As Dmitri Shostakovich had discovered to his cost when his mordant opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (1934) was savaged by Stalin and removed from the stage, Soviet authorities had no time for sad endings. Sensing the way the political winds were blowing, Prokofiev and Radlov substituted Shakespeare's original ending with a happy one: Romeo arrives in the nick of time to find Juliet alive, and the two live happily ever after. Living happily ever after not only accorded with Stalin's order that everyone should do so or face the consequences; it also dovetailed with Prokofiev's Christian Scientist belief in life everlasting. However, Stalin's cultural commissar Andre Zhdanov also maintained that, in effect, old was good, new was bad. So by 1938 *Romeo and Juliet* were restored to their rightful places of, well, dying happily ever after.

Prokofiev in 1941 maintained that the "barbarism" of his first ending was driven by the belief that "living people can dance, the dying cannot". There were also musical considerations, as Prokofiev explained:

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 a tragic ending could be expressed in the dance and in due time the music for that ending was written.

Although Prokofiev failed to identify the choreographers with whom he wrought the changes, they were likely to have included the Czech Ivo Psota, with whom he collaborated on an abridged version that finally received its world première in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1938. The public success of the Brno performance, together with a wartime relaxation in Soviet cultural policy, prompted the Kirov and Bolshoi ballets to overcome their reluctance. The Soviet première of *Romeo and Juliet*, choreographed by Leonid Lavrovsky in association with Radlov, was given by the Kirov in 1940. The Bolshoi followed suit in 1946.

The Kirov production was and remains controversial. The constant revisions that the work had undergone resulted in what the critic Arlene Croce described as a "choreographic nightmare". Lavrovsky was forced to add an epilogue, insert solo dances, delete divertissements, and on and on. But it was the music that suffered most. Galina Ulanova, the great Soviet ballerina who danced Juliet, recalled the initial friction between the composer and choreographer:

Lavrovsky and Prokofiev had had some heated arguments about the music. Lavrovsky had told the composer that there was not enough music in the ballet for a full-length production and that he would have to add to it. To which Prokofiev had stubbornly replied, "I have written exactly as much music as is necessary and I am not going to add a single note. The ballet is complete as it is. You may take it or leave it."

Ulanova, who with the other dancers had threatened strike action on the eve of the première, went on to describe an early rehearsal in which the composer's reputed prickliness was apparent:

Suddenly we were startled by a shout from Lavrovsky: "Why don't you begin?" "We can't hear the music," we replied. Prokofiev, who was present, lost his temper: "I know what you want!" he shouted. "You want drums not music!" We did not take offence. We invited him to come on to the stage and sit beside us. He did so, and throughout the entire scene he sat, listening carefully to the orchestra without saying a word. But on leaving, he said, still looking very annoyed, "Very well, I shall rewrite the music here and add something."

In the end, such was the extent of the revisions that legend has it Prokofiev had difficulty recognising his own score, which had been re-orchestrated to a syrupy consistency quite at odds with his usual economy. Soviet cultural commissars believed that the 'masses' were uplifted by lashings of strings and brass.

Despite all the changes, Prokofiev's music carries considerable literary power in its own right. *Romeo and Juliet* is not simply a story told to music – it is a story told in music. Subtle themes assume dramatic functions; the *andante tenero* that accompanies the first meeting of the doomed couple is recalled when Juliet dreams of Romeo. Romeo's arrival is heralded by a passionate cello theme, and the two melodies combine during the pas de deux. What had earlier begun as a light-hearted scherzando depicting Juliet as an innocent and excitable young girl undergoes a series of transformations until making its last, impassioned, appearance in the strings at the end. Prokofiev also uses rhythm to great dramatic effect. The physicality of the fight between Tybalt and Mercutio is mirrored in syncopated jabs and asymmetrical rhythms. The frenetic semiquavers and dissonant punctuations accompanying Romeo's subsequent struggle with Tybalt seem to evoke not only his sense of duty to his fallen friend, but his uncontrolled fury at what has happened. They also herald the inevitable and devastating consequences of his actions.

As had Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky before him, Prokofiev in *Romeo and Juliet* was able to invest the music itself with an expressive function, rather than relegating it to a mere soundtrack to events unfolding on stage. Against all odds – political, artistic and personal – Prokofiev succeeded in greatly enriching Russian ballet music's symphonic traditions

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