

Montagues and Capulets from Romeo and Juliet Suite 2

Prokofiev, Sergei (1891 - 1953)

Prokofiev was a successful concert pianist and a prolific composer in a range of genres, including operas, ballets, and even music for motion pictures during the 1930's. As he grew up an only child in his native Russia, he began writing music, composing steadily from age 4 onward. He was reported to be a rebellious child, whose teachers found him arrogant and unpredictable. His skills were recognized, however, and he went on to attend the St. Petersburg Conservatory where one of his teachers was Rimsky-Korsakoff.

From the time of political unrest in Russia, around 1918, Prokofiev had been living abroad, primarily in Paris, and writing prolifically. In spite of his absence, his music was becoming more and more popular in his home country. In 1936 he received a commission from the Kirov Ballet to compose an opera based on Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Prokofiev envisioned his ballet being performed in Leningrad by the Kirov company. The Kirov backed out before he had even completed the work, however, citing the "overwhelming complexity" of the music. He then offered it to the Bolshoi ballet company, based in Moscow. There was a dispute about whether the ending should be tragic, as Shakespeare intended, or happy and uplifting, as the state required. A happy ending was actually written, but an academic outcry resulted and Prokofiev insisted on his original being restored. The Bolshoi refused to perform it, calling the music "impossible to dance to". Prokofiev returned to Leningrad and to the Leningrad Ballet School, who also declined. He finally left Russia and went to the Brno Opera in Czechoslovakia, where the original Kirov dancers agreed to perform it in 1938, and it premiered in Brno, a full two years after it was completed. Rehearsals reportedly included "shouting matches with the choreographer and curses from the dancers."

For performance by orchestra, Prokofiev extracted three suites from the ballet. *Montagues and Capulets* is the centerpiece of Suite 2 and introduces the feuding between the two powerful families. Its proper title is *Dance of the Knights*, and it is a ballroom scene, with the music being danced by the knights and ladies of the two families in a slow, dignified fashion. There is a strong, bold pulsating beat from the brass which is picked up by the strings. The atmosphere is menacing and intimidating, reflecting the enmity between the two families. There is, however, a short section of quiet melody as Juliet dances with her betrothed amidst the mayhem.

It has been said that Prokofiev is very good at composing music to portray characters. Think of *Peter and the Wolf*. Here is another example of that brilliance.

Beryl McHenry