

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Romeo and Juliet Suite

We are all not so distantly removed as to firmly recognize the tumultuous changes that shaped the world between 1891 and 1953. To imagine a composer's life and work, within this period, without taking due notice of historical background is to 'miss the boat' entirely. If one could mention to what extent European composers from Ravel to Elgar were affected by World War I. If one could recognize the turmoil of World War II meted out upon music composition and performance in Europe. If one could add to this the emergence of the USSR on the one hand, and the climate of modernization on the other. This modernization in all matters would be no less prevalent in music and architecture. It would bring the Bauhaus school of Design and the sonically comparable Second Viennese School of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg to the fore, and deliver through the *Darmstadt* period the antecedence of our entire modern tableaux. One should also recognize how very quickly all this had happened, connecting in short shrift, the Victorian age emerging triumphant from its industrial grime - to the second Elizabethan age of jet travel, the television and the Cold War.

Prokofiev's life, career and working style reflects his extraordinary presence in the global arena marked equally by his 'on again-off again' relationship with the authorities in the USSR. His early compositions, especially for piano are marked with an iconoclastic, willful, unconventional, revolution of their own. By 1908/9 Prokofiev had graduated in composition from the conservatory and by 1913/14 was the pride of the student body. He garnered the coveted Rubinstein Award by submitting and playing his own First Concerto, instead of choosing a customary classical piece. The unbridled, unconventional Prokofiev train was leaving the station.

In June 1914 he met with Diaghilev in London and was introduced to the music of Stravinsky through *Petroushka*, *The Firebird* and of course, *The Rite of Spring*. It is safe to say that no composer effected and influenced Prokofiev more than Igor Stravinsky. Following the 1917 Revolution Prokofiev left for the United States – with the publicized intent of returning in a few months. He remained until 1922 and his New York and Chicago periods saw the writing of the *Scythian Suite*, *The Love of Three Oranges*, *The Tale of the Buffoon* and many other works that satiated his desire for an operatic or theatrical setting. He was completely mesmerized by the possibilities exhibited by Stravinsky's music, and tried in this period to compete haplessly with both Stravinsky and Rachmaninov, before a public that expected him to outshine both.

The Paris period from 1922-36 brought him closer to home, and having never completely lost touch, was invited home to the Leningrad PO as early as 1923. In 1927 when he did finally return home almost nine years later, he was fêted on tour and returned a 'conquering hero' more than a 'prodigal son'. His openly nationalistic tendencies and his ability to praise, at

every step, the course that his homeland had taken, made his subsequent returns palatable and almost necessary for the authorities – as they searched for reasons to be proud. By 1933 he had received his first Soviet commission and it was a year later, at the suggestion of the Kirov Ballet, that he embarked on his ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, from which the suite is compiled. The subject was controversial and by the time it was taken over by the Bolshoi in Moscow, there was an attempt underway to rewrite Shakespeare. After all, Prokofiev noted “...living people can dance, the dead cannot.” Having Romeo arrive in the ‘nick of time’ to change the ending into a moment of jubilation was the beginning of the end for the piece, that was then rejected out of hand. It was reworked and revised several times, to regain a place in the performing world. Prokofiev was to remain in the USSR for the rest of his life. His disappointment over *Romeo and Juliet* would not have measured against the series of heart attacks that followed, the outbreak of World War II, the move to the comparative safety but emptiness of Kazakhstan and the disruption forever of his Muscovite existence.

Yet, there is a quintessential Prokofiev sound that permeates all his work, including the *Romeo and Juliet* Suite. The sound reveals something new, something fresh in melody and orchestration. The structural form belies his strict training and yet, if one was to name a Russian who had the adventurousness and daring exhibited by the European movements of the Second Viennese School or the Impressionism of the French, it would undoubtedly be Prokofiev.

Zane Dalal ©2011