Prokofiev
Romeo & Juliet
Drama & Dance

An historical overview created for The Philadelphia Orchestra by Michael M. Cone

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Prokofiev, Romeo & Juliet: Drama & Dance

Tracks and clips:

1. Introduction  2:17
   a. Sergey Prokofiev (SP), Romeo & Juliet, Op. 64 (R&J), Cleveland Orchestra (CO), Lorin Maazel, Decca 4529702 recorded 1973.*

2. L'Ancien Régime  11:00
   a. SP, Velikan, Mikhailovsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, Mikhail Leontiev, this is in three youtube.com clips: y80AXfBSYkw, oBARsx4Wy5c, and 9jcJjI_TUF8, all were recorded 5/23/2010.
   h. SP, Piano Concerto No. 2 in g, Op. 16, Tedd Joselson, PO, EO, RCA ARL1-0751 recorded 5/14/1974.

3. Prokofiev Abroad  10:44
   a. Gustave Charpentier, Louise, Mary Garden, Victor Studio Orchestra, Rosario Bourdon, Romophone 81008-2 recorded 12/24/1926.


g. Maurice Ravel, *Concerto for the Left Hand*, Mar. 82, Robert Casadesus, PO, EO, Sony MHK 63316 recorded 1/22/1947.


4. Comrade Composer 8:32


5. The Writing of the Ballet

5:33


c. SP, RJ op. cit.

6. Romeo & Juliet

33:58

a. SP, Romeo & Juliet Suite No. 2, Op. 64ter (S2), PO, RM, EMI 97982 2 recorded 2/18/1981.

b. Ibid. but Romeo & Juliet Suite No. 1, Op. 64bis (S1).

c-h. SP, S2 op. cit.

i-j. SP, S1 op. cit.

k-o. SP, S2 op. cit.

7. Envoi

1:10

8. Catharsis

6:23

a. SP, RJ op. cit.

* These recordings are available as paid downloads from PrestoClassical.com.
Thanks, Bibliography & Comments

Whenever I interview Stéphane Denève, I know that it’s going to go well — and be lots of fun, besides. He’s exactly the way he comes across on this disc: intelligent, engaged, upbeat — an exciting conversationalist. On top of all that, it almost seems too much that he’s an extraordinarily fine musician with a real ability to convey his insights to others. I owe any success with this effort to him.

I had this bright idea: everyone knows the play so why not intersperse the text with quotes from Shakespeare? The problem is that the immortal bard would never have become so had his reputation depended on me. Fortunately, Charles McMahon, actor and Artistic Director of Philadelphia’s Lantern Theater Co., came to my rescue. Al Lesitsky pointed out a way that I could improve the narrative, besides saving me with several reissued recordings that were much better than the ones that I had found: he’s an unbelievable resource, the thinking man’s record collector. Stan Scordilis identified a different serious problem in the narrative and suggested several amplifications that were easily achieved, but had escaped me to that point. Connie did the graphics and served as listener of first resort. In several places on the CD that was trickier than one might think: I was lucky I had her around and luckier that she is always willing to help.

In my narrative, I split Prokofiev’s life into three parts, biographers usually divide it in two. I had reference to two wonderful texts: for the first half: David Nice, Prokofiev, From Russia to the West, 1891-1935, Yale University Press, 2003; and, for the second: Simon Morrison, The People’s Artist, Prokofiev’s Soviet Years, Oxford University Press, 2009. Morrison was also the editor of Sergey Prokofiev and His World, Princeton University Press, 2008. A footnote in The People’s Artist led me to Deborah Annette Wilson’s Ohio State University doctoral dissertation, Prokofiev’s Romeo and Juliet: History of a Compromise, 2003. It was absolutely invaluable for background on the tortured path that this great masterpiece traveled between conception and performance. Study scores of R&J, as Connie and I came to call it during the six month genesis of this CD, were once available from Kalmus, but are no longer, not even second hand. I suspected copyright problems, and a call to Kalmus verified that. After being absolutely positive that I was going to tear out what little hair I have
left trying to coordinate clips by sound alone, I finally thought of a piano score: Musikverlag Hans Sikorski GmbH & Co. KG, Hamburg, Prokofiev Romeo & Juliet, Op. 64 Piano Score, ed. nr. 2176. An orchestral score would have been better, but this served and will keep my barber in business. Anything of this sort requires seemingly innumerable trips to general reference works. For this CD I used three: The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Stanley Sadie, ed., MacMillan, 1980; The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, Stanley Sadie, ed., MacMillan, 1992; and wikipedia.org. The Penguin Shakespeare edition of Romeo & Juliet provided the quotes and also allowed me to renew my acquaintance with this perpetual favorite: quite shocking literature when one considers it carefully and in line with contemporary concerns. Finally, for many reasons, I like to feature Philadelphia Orchestra recordings. The clip list that began this booklet is much better than its predecessors because of a recent publication: Richard A. Kaplan, The Philadelphia Orchestra, An Annotated Discography, Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

My first exposure to Prokofiev was his Classical Symphony: the Ormandy recording that I use in this CD, but in its rather screechy original LP issue. Thrilled hardly begins to express my feelings on hearing it then. It wasn’t until years later that I saw the Pennsylvania Ballet dance the John Cranko setting of Romeo & Juliet. I’ve seen it several times since then and once, in the Kenneth MacMillan version, at Covent Garden. Its great romantic and tragic sweep never loses its appeal for me and I still marvel at the wonders of the score. I think that dance is 90% music, that’s true of opera, too — yes, I know that I’m a philistine. Outside of Tchaikovsky, you can’t find a more mouth-watering score than this one. Stravinsky wrote some beautiful ones, Appollon musagète is a favorite; Leo Delibes’s Sylvia is no slouch; but they don’t reach the heights of Romeo & Juliet. I felt ratified when Stéphane agreed with my opinion.

Prokofiev is unusual among the modernist composers because he is so melodic. Only Aaron Copland comes to mind as his equal in this area. Much is made of the influence of the soviet state on Prokofiev’s use of melody, but his gift was innate and, as he matured, he seems to have realized how unusual it was. He began the turn towards melody about halfway through his career; it strengthened as he matured. The wild key choices, weird dissonances and other characteristics of his early work continue, but the melody seduces one’s ear away from shock by its transcendent
beauty. His music is as ravishing as anything Handel, Schubert or Dvořák wrote, and of much higher quality than the last delivers. It’s as good as the first two. This raises the interesting esthetic question of what makes beauty in music. Hanslick’s essay, The Beautiful in Music, failed to thrill me when I read it decades ago. I just love Webern and Schoenberg and their melodies are hard to detect. I am unable to reconcile these problems. Perhaps you can help. If you have an idea, contact me through The Philadelphia Orchestra. I’ll be glad to listen. Maybe it’s you that I should interview for another CD. Forwarding your thoughts to me will give me input as to where to go and how to get there as this series of educational materials continues.

Even the most beautiful music fails when it is improperly performed. Some years ago, I heard a conductor ruin Beethoven’s Ninth, something that I had theretofore thought impossible (no, it wasn’t in Philadelphia). But I know that I may always rely on the musicians of The Philadelphia Orchestra to deliver the goods. Looking for examples, I went through a number of recordings of Romeo & Juliet, the ballet and all three of its suites. I kept coming back to The Philadelphia Orchestra ones. This CD, and the series of which it is a part, is really dedicated to those musicians. During the season, I know Thursday nights will be intellectually stimulating. That the music will be well thought through, considered with nearly academic rigor. That the timbre will be full when it should be, and lean when it shouldn’t. That every nuance will be observed. That the enthralling sound that is classical orchestral music will be flawlessly delivered. And that I will leave exhausted, excited, and pleased to have heard these great artists once again. My hat’s off to them!

Mike Cone
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**Total Timing**  1:19:35