

LIVE
FROM LINCOLN CENTER



May 21, 2009, 8:00pm on PBS
New York City Ballet: *Romeo + Juliet*

Shakespeare's *Romeo + Juliet* has served as inspiration for composers as diverse as Berlioz, Tchaikovsky, Gounod, David Diamond and Leonard Bernstein ("West Side Story" is, after all, the *Romeo + Juliet* story transferred to New York City's ethnic gangs.) Among the most imaginative and gripping of all musical retellings of the *Romeo + Juliet* story is the score composed by Sergei Prokofiev in 1935 for his evening-length ballet.

Prokofiev's *Romeo + Juliet* takes its place alongside the three Tchaikovsky Ballets--"The Nutcracker", *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty*--as the high point of Russian ballet creativity. We of Live From Lincoln Center are proud and delighted that our next presentation, on Thursday evening, May 21 will be the New York City Ballet's production of *Romeo + Juliet* in the acclaimed choreography by the Company's Director, Peter Martins.

The history of Prokofiev's *Romeo + Juliet* is a long and complicated one. In the turmoil of the Soviet Revolution Prokofiev picked himself up and went on a journey that embraced Siberia, Japan, Honolulu and ultimately the United States. In November, 1918, days after the Armistice that ended World War 1, he made his American debut at a piano recital in New York. Not long afterwards the Chicago Opera Company commissioned him to compose an opera. The result was *The Love for Three Oranges*, given its premiere by the Company in December, 1921. It was also in Chicago, in that same month, that Prokofiev played the world premiere of his sparkling Third Piano Concerto.

Though he had settled in Paris, Prokofiev made two return visits to Russia, in 1927 and 1929. Then in the early 1930s came his fateful decision to return permanently to Russia. I say "fateful" because after a hero's welcome and an active period that produced some of his best and best-loved music, he--along with Shostakovich and other leading Soviet composers--was condemned officially in 1948 as the composer of music befouled by Western "decadent formalism", whatever that was. After five years of a rather fallow creative period, Prokofiev died in March, 1953, on the same day, ironically, as his tormentor, Josef Stalin.

Romeo + Juliet, one of Prokofiev's early works upon his return to Russia, was originally to have been written for Leningrad's (now again St. Petersburg's) Kirov Theater. Prokofiev himself wrote: "But the Kirov backed out, and I signed a contract with Moscow's Bolshoi Theater instead." He composed the score in the summer of 1935 but when he delivered it, "the Bolshoi declared it impossible to dance to, and the contract was broken." The ballet company in Brno, Czechoslovakia did not find it "impossible to dance to" and so the world premiere of Prokofiev's *Romeo + Juliet* was presented not by one of Russia's premiere ballet companies, but by the Brno ballet in December, 1938.

One distinct, if not shocking element in the original ending as planned by Prokofiev and Kirov choreographer, Leonid Lavrovsky, was the imposition of a happy ending on the proceedings: Romeo and Juliet are alive and "kicking" at the end. Prokofiev justified this early on by saying that dead people do not dance, only living people do. But eventually he became convinced that Shakespeare knew what he was doing, and the music ends with the tragedy of the deaths of both Romeo and Juliet. The entire score is pictorial, dramatic, yearning and intense and is full of glorious moments for the principals as well as for the full corps of dancers.

So mark your calendars for the next scheduled Live From Lincoln Center: Thursday evening, May 21, the New York City Ballet's production of Prokofiev's *Romeo + Juliet*. In closing let me repeat the advice that you check with your local PBS station as to the exact time and date of the telecast in your area.

Enjoy!

By MARTIN BOOKSPAN