

# Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*: Some Consequences of the "Happy Ending"

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## Abstract

This essay discusses some of the musico-dramaturgical implications of Prokofiev's ballet score for choreographic adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Prokofiev's original score itself alters Shakespeare's tragedy by giving it a "happy ending," and the popular, better-known "tragic" versions of the ballet are based on a score that represents a later, somewhat problematic, set of compromises. Adapting Shakespeare's plotline to the dancing stage is thus subject to multiple, often conflicting allegiances, as choreographers make choices with regard to how to integrate Prokofiev's already variously adapted musical score into their own vision of the ballet. Reversing the ending of a musico-dramatic work does not automatically alter the affective quality of the entire work, yet any traces of the non-tragic vision in Prokofiev's score would presumably be at odds with Shakespeare, the reinstatement of the tragic ending notwithstanding. I identify several such possible remnants of Prokofiev's original vision (in the overture, Romeo's first entrance, and the first fight scene) and examine choreographic responses to them by Leonid Lavrovsky, Rudolf Nureyev, Angelin Preljocaj, and Mark Morris.

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Danced adaptations of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* frequently involve Sergei Prokofiev's musical score of the same name, a work that has been used by numerous choreographers, making the Shakespeare/Prokofiev *Romeo and Juliet* one of the most performed full-length ballets since 1940.<sup>1</sup> The popularity of the plot of *Romeo and Juliet* for a ballet is fairly easy to understand. First, dancing is already present in the form of the ballroom scene and the two fight scenes — especially if the fights, being set outdoors, are preceded by some merry folk dancing by the *corps de ballet*. Thus we already have two styles of diegetic dancing — courtly and country — as well as two sword fights. Then there is the (non-diegetic) dancing-out of a moving love story by the two principal dancers. Even the older dancers in the company, who sometimes perform the less technically demanding "character" roles, are provided for in the roles of the Capulet and Montague parents and the nurse. The ballet practically stages itself. Couple this with the advantage of using a well known plot — thereby eliminating the need for excessive explanations that may be difficult to get across

without words — and we have a blockbuster! The persistent use of Prokofiev's score, on the other hand, is less self-evident, since a pre-existing musical score has both advantages (a ready-made rhythmic and emotional framework on which to hang the choreography) and disadvantages (the restrictions imposed by the same framework). Moreover, Prokofiev's score is no mere background music; it is a complex orchestral composition that stands on its own, so that audiences may be as involved in listening to the music as in watching the dancing, while choreographers may be attracted by the challenge of creating their own interpretation of a musical warhorse almost as a rite of passage.

Further complications arise when one keeps in mind that Prokofiev's original score itself alters Shakespeare's tragedy by giving it a "happy ending" and that the popular, better-known "tragic" versions of the ballet are based on a score that represents a later, somewhat problematic, set of compromises. Choreographers who are drawn to the Prokofiev music are thus, in a sense, confronted with several "original sources" to work with, sources that at times may be at odds with one another. Adapting Shakespeare's plotline to the dancing stage is thus subject to multiple, often conflicting allegiances, as choreographers make choices with regard to how to integrate Prokofiev's already variously-adapted musical score into their own vision of the ballet. Recently, the original score was restored by musicologist and Prokofiev specialist Simon Morrison, and a "happy ending" version was choreographed by Mark Morris and performed by his company in 2008.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, I consider some of the musico-dramaturgical implications of Prokofiev's ballet score for choreographic adaptations of Shakespeare's play, as well the tensions created by the shift between a "happy" and a "tragic" ending.

### Prokofiev's Score

Much has been written about the intrigues surrounding the composition of Sergei Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* score (for example, by Bennett, Wilson, Kravetz, and Morrison), so a brief summary here will suffice. Conceived in 1934 with the Leningrad Kirov Ballet in mind but composed a year later for the Moscow Bolshoi, it was not performed in its entirety until 1940, at the Kirov, by which time it had undergone numerous revisions.<sup>3</sup> In Prokofiev's original version the lovers do not die, since Friar Laurence intercepts Romeo in time and explains the effects of the potion. Various reasons have been proposed for this initial decision to reverse Shakespeare's tragic ending. Simon Morrison has suggested that the composer's religious views played a significant part: Prokofiev, who had committed to the Christian Science faith in 1924, "wanted his music to look toward the light, to embody the divine" (Morrison 2009b, 3). The so-called happy ending was

intended to function as an apotheosis, with Romeo and Juliet dancing in paradise for all eternity.<sup>4</sup> Another theory is that Prokofiev's collaborators on the libretto wanted to give the story a proletarian spin, with the lovers representing the forward-looking communist youth struggling against the older generation's outmoded ways (3). As such, their message would presumably be stronger if they survived. Prokofiev's own reason was that "only living people can dance" (3). Reactions to the proposed happy ending ranged from approval to outrage, with a middle course suggested by way of adding a subtitle, "On Motifs of Shakespeare," to acknowledge a distancing from the original play. (This is also the subtitle of the Mark Morris work.) For whatever reason(s), the happy ending had been abolished by the time of the work's first performance.

To arrange Shakespeare's play into a ballet libretto for the 1935 version, Prokofiev worked with theater director Sergei Radlov, dramatist Adrian Piotrovsky, and choreographer Rostislav Zakharov. The level of detail in the pre-compositional drafts is remarkable. Not only is the exact timing of each dance number noted, but often the character of the musical number, as well. Yet by the time the work was performed in 1940, a different choreographer, Leonid Lavrovsky, had been appointed at the Kirov, and, not surprisingly, he had his own vision of how the work should unfold. The tragic ending had been reinstated long before, but it was Lavrovsky's numerous other requests for changes that created much tension between composer and choreographer. For one thing, Lavrovsky insisted on more purely dance numbers, both for the ensemble and for the soloists, in contrast to Prokofiev's original emphasis on the drama, and even went as far as inserting an unrelated composition of Prokofiev's to serve as an additional folk dance (Wilson 2003, 167). Possibly because Prokofiev was eager to have the ballet finally performed, he reluctantly gave in to Lavrovsky.<sup>5</sup>

### Changing the Ending

The first thing that strikes one when comparing the two versions is the relative brevity of the new tragic ending, as well as its subtitle, "Epilogue," both of which suggest a tacked-on quality. In fact, as Morrison has shown, rather than composing entirely new music for the new ending, Prokofiev reworked some of the music from his original non-tragic version. This is a curious transformation that underscores the importance of context in the perception of the music. That the music accompanying Juliet's awakening in the non-tragic version was reworked into the music of her death (no. 52 in the 1940 score) is not, however, as outrageous as it might seem, because this music has a very wistful quality that can be made to go in either direction. More dramatic is the music immediately preceding it (no. 51). In the non-tragic score, this is the music during which Romeo appears at Juliet's bedside, followed soon by Friar Laurence. In the

tragic version, it accompanies the most heart-wrenching scene of the entire ballet, during which Romeo discovers Juliet, tries to revive her (in many ballets, he ends up "dancing" with her limp body), and finally drinks the poison. After seeing the two versions in reverse chronological order (I had seen the traditional Kenneth MacMillan choreography before the Mark Morris version), it struck me that this music, which sounded heartbreaking in the traditional version, came across as ostentatiously melodramatic when Friar Laurence arrived as a *deus-ex-machina* and prevented Romeo from harming himself. In fact, the main musical motif of this passage is based on a musical cliché: a chromatically descending melody line that has come to be associated with horror in film music.<sup>6</sup>

### Consequences

Reversing the ending of a musico-dramatic work does not automatically alter the affective quality of the entire work. Traces of the original temperament may remain, even though, as shown above, context can affect perception of the music just as music can affect perception of a situation. Because Prokofiev's original vision of this work was itself a reversal of Shakespeare's, any remnants of a non-tragic vision would presumably be at odds with Shakespeare, despite the reinstatement of the tragic ending. Below I identify several such possible remnants of Prokofiev's non-tragic vision that may be found at the beginning of the score — the overture (titled "Introduction"), Romeo's entrance, and the fight scene — and examine selected choreographers' responses to them.

### The Introduction

Not surprisingly, if we accept Prokofiev's life-affirming outlook, the orchestral introduction is based mostly on themes that will later become associated with love; there is no trace of any sinister foreboding. Compare this to Shakespeare's Prologue to act 1, where, in the short span of fourteen lines of text, seventeen grim words or phrases are uttered: "grudge . . . mutiny . . . blood . . . unclean . . . fatal . . . foes . . . misadventured . . . piteous . . . death . . . bury . . . strife . . . fearful . . . rage . . . death-mark'd . . . star-cross'd . . . take their life . . . their children's end" (Prologue 3-11).

At least two choreographers have felt the need to modify this discrepancy. Rudolf Nureyev's solution was to move the ominous-sounding music titled "The Prince's Command" from the end of the fight in act 1, scene 1 to the end of the Introduction, during which mysterious figures in dark cloaks move about the stage menacingly and finally reveal a grim funeral procession, perhaps cleverly hinting at the plague that will play such a key role in the story's outcome.<sup>7</sup> Angelin Preljocaj, whose story is set in a dismal dystopia, cuts the Introduction altogether (as well as the

first few musical numbers), substituting concrete sounds appropriate to his dramatic setting (an urban subway passage).

### The Fight Scene

Along similar lines, the fight music in act 1, scene 1 sounds quite lighthearted, perhaps better suited for a fencing class than a fight between sworn enemies. In fact, the quarrel, before the fight proper, has more sinister-sounding moments, but those morph in and out of folk-dance melodies, thus reducing the menacing effect. The actual fight music sounds very mechanical, as if the participants are going through their motions on "auto-pilot." This may well be a valid interpretation of a Montague's response to seeing a Capulet, and vice versa, but the groundwork was laid by Prokofiev, and a choreographer will need to decide whether to accept it or to devise ways of contradicting it. In the majority of productions that I have seen, the fight scene does indeed appear to have an "auto-pilot" quality. Mark Morris extends this concept by making this scene part fight, part sword dance, with the dancers at one point carrying their swords above their heads as they dance. Preljocaj offers a different solution: by cutting all the music that precedes the actual fighting and having the preceding quarrel take place in silence, he establishes a menacing atmosphere before the music begins and thereby subjects the music to his vision rather than letting it dictate the action.

### Romeo's Introduction

The way in which Romeo is introduced musically may have also been influenced by the fact that Prokofiev's original version was not going to end tragically. In Shakespeare's play, Romeo is first mentioned towards the end of act 1, scene 1, in a conversation between his parents and Benvolio that takes place after the first fight. The expressions that Montague uses to describe his son all point to a melancholy disposition: "with tears augmenting the fresh morning dew . . . adding to clouds more clouds with his deep sighs . . . shuts up his windows, locks fair daylight out" (1.1.125-32). Later, when Romeo enters and laments about Rosaline, his speech further demonstrates his despondency: "Ay me, sad hours seem long" (1.1.154), "griefs of mine own lie heavy in my breast" (1.1.179), "a sick man in sadness makes his will" (1.1.195), and "do I live dead that live to tell it now" (1.1.217).

Prokofiev's music for Romeo's first appearance (which, incidentally, occurs immediately after the overture) seems to be at odds with the character depicted in Shakespeare's text. Although a note in the scenario describes Romeo as "very pensive," the music suggests a much less serious portrayal.<sup>8</sup> Following some introductory chords played by plucked strings (No. 2; bars 1-6), a rather prosaic tune on the bassoon (an instrument sometimes associated with comic representation)

is heard (bars 7-14).<sup>9</sup> Finally, a snippet of a more lyrical melody on the clarinet emerges (bars 15-23), but disintegrates and is repeated (bars 24-31) before the bumbling bassoon tune returns (bars 32-39). Karen Bennett, in her analysis of the music, writes: "This first rendition of Romeo's theme is not only extremely disjointed and incoherent, but also somewhat comic . . . Romeo is being portrayed as immature and uncoordinated, and gawkily clownish, but without the wit and style of Mercutio" (Bennett 2003, 319-20). The scene ends with four bars of slower ascending notes with a lush chordal accompaniment.

Leonid Lavrovsky's introduction of Romeo is rather neutral.<sup>10</sup> A young man (Romeo) is shown walking, then sitting and reading. He is joined by another (Benvolio), and the two walk off together. Other characters appear only very briefly, performing naturalistic movements (walking, sitting; there is no dancing yet), thus subsuming the prosaic and slightly comic quality of the music into a portrayal of equally prosaic (everyday) events. Changes in the music do, however, coincide with changes in image: a young woman (Juliet) looks out of a window on the first sounding of the more lyrical melody, while Benvolio enters on the second; on the lush chords of the ending, another woman (an anonymous townspeople) on a balcony does an early morning stretch before descending down some steps into the street.

In Nureyev's version, too, Romeo is not despondent. He enters with a few steps and strikes a confident pose.<sup>11</sup> He then proceeds to dance a very energetic balletic solo that shows off the dancer's technical ability but has little to do with the music. For although the steps are all executed in time with the music, there are no nuances in the choreography that might reflect the changes of mood in the music noted above.<sup>12</sup>

Perhaps because Morris was choreographing the "happy ending" version, he could afford to take a more lighthearted, ironic approach to the work, as in the opening scene he seems to have used the comic quality of the music to play with audience expectations.<sup>13</sup> As the curtain rises, we see a young man (whom we may take to be Romeo, but who turns out to be Benvolio) sitting pensively among some wooden structures (which appear to be pews in a church, but which we come to realize — as several girls enter running and skipping and Friar Laurence mimes picking flowers — actually belong to an outdoor setting). When Romeo finally does enter, however, there is no doubt about his identity because he enters with all the balletic bells and whistles: on the lyrical tune, highlighted by a spotlight, and doing a totally gratuitous (given the naturalistic movements of the other characters so far) leap into a clichéd balletic pose.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

Media psychologist Stuart Fischhoff has pointed out that the film experience operates on a variety of signifiatory levels:

The general feeling about film is that it is singularly a visual experience. It is not. While we certainly experience film through our eyes, we just as surely experience it through our ears . . . Music plays upon our emotions. It is generally a non-intellectual communication. The listener does not need to know what the music means, only how it makes him feel . . . The onscreen action, of course, provides clues and cues as to how the accompanying music does or is supposed to make us feel. (Fischhoff n.d.)

Because most ballets and modern dances are performed to music, a similar dynamic also applies to dance, and it appears to apply to choreographers (and dancers) as much as to audience members. Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* score is such a significant, compelling, musical composition that choreographers who choose to employ it cannot help but have their choreographic decisions influenced by it — consciously or not — as much as by Shakespeare's play. I showed only a few brief examples of how the selected choreographers juggled their conflicting allegiances to playwright and composer and how some of the changes to Shakespeare made by Prokofiev affected their decision-making: sometimes choreographers decide to move particular sections of the score around to fit a particular scene; sometimes they insert parts of other compositions to fill perceived gaps; sometimes they reinterpret the music's emotional impact by altering the context in which it appears; and sometimes they feel compelled to leave out portions of the music altogether. The various versions of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* highlight the manifold tensions and complexities involved in combining a well-known story, a choreographer's vision, and a composer's score, indicating that for a choreographer there is more at stake than merely finding and setting appropriate movements and steps to music.

### Notes

1. The choreographers include Leonid Lavrovsky (1940), Frederick Ashton (1955), John Cranko (1958), Kenneth MacMillan (1965), John Neumeier (1971), Rudolf Nureyev (1977), Yuri Grigorovich (after Lavrovsky; 1979), Angelin Preljocaj (1990), and Mark Morris (2008), to name some of the better-known ones. Occasionally choreographers have turned to music other than Prokofiev's for their versions of *Romeo and Juliet*: for example, Antony Tudor (1943; music by Frederick Delius) and Maurice Béjart (1966; music by Hector Berlioz). See Felciano and Hellman, *Crossed Stars* (1994) for more about different versions of the ballet.
2. For more on the "happy ending" musical score, see Morrison 2009a, 2009b, and 2016. I am grateful to the Mark Morris Dance Group for lending me a video of one of the company's

performances of this work to use for this study. The video was filmed at the Fisher Center at Bard College. The artists on this video include the Mark Morris Dance Group, with Maile Okamura as Juliet and Noah Vinson as Romeo. The production alternated casts; the one I saw live, in July 2008, featured Rita Donahue as Juliet and David Leventhal as Romeo.

3. See Wilson, "Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* (2003)", for a detailed account of the transformation of the score.
4. Prokofiev's notes in the original score suggest that he wanted a serene rather than triumphant ending: the penultimate number (no. 55) was to be "bright . . . but would not attain a forte." The music was criticized, much to the composer's chagrin, for "not express[ing] any real joy at the end" (Morrison 2009b, 4). This factor may have played a part in the happy ending being eventually scrapped.
5. A shortened version of the ballet, danced to excerpts from the score, had meanwhile been performed in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1938 (see Semberová 1994).
6. For example, the famous opening of J. S. Bach's *Tocatta and Fugue* in D minor, BWV 565. Uncannily, the same set of descending notes [B-flat, A, A-flat, G, G-flat] that make up Prokofiev's theme in this section was also used by Andrew Lloyd Webber as the theme for his overture to *The Phantom of the Opera* (Prokofiev, No. 51 measures 13-15; Webber, Overture measures 1-2).
7. Nureyev choreographed his own version of the ballet for the London Festival Ballet in 1977. Previously he had danced the role of Romeo (with Margot Fonteyn as Juliet) in the Royal Ballet's 1965 production choreographed by Kenneth MacMillan.
8. Notes added to the revised 1935 scenario read: "A street. Romeo [Early morning. Romeo passes by, very pensive. Perhaps some female passers-by seek to halt him, but he pays no notice.] 1 minute" (Morrison 2009a, 395).
9. Hector Berlioz, who composed a score of *Romeo and Juliet* in 1866 (see note 1), had remarked that "[the bassoon's] timbre, totally lacking in éclat and nobility, has a propensity for the grotesque." See William Waterhouse, "Bassoon," *Grove Music Online*, n.d. For use of the bassoon in animated cartoons, see: <http://www.npr.org/2011/09/04/139947087/the-clown-of-the-orchestra-takes-its-revenge> [accessed 3 February 2014].
10. Although I watched the 1954 film version of the ballet, which may differ from the original staged version, the scene in question could have easily been performed on stage.
11. YouTube excerpts from the 1983 production *Romeo e Giulietta*, filmed in Milan, with Rudolf Nureyev (Romeo), Carla Fracci (Juliet), Margot Fonteyn (Lady Capulet). This excerpt begins just after Romeo's opening pose.



12. I watched this passage with the sound turned off to see if I could detect any indication of change of mood in the choreography, but saw none.
13. Despite being now widely known as Mark Morris's "happy ending" version, the ending is not without sadness. Prokofiev, as already mentioned, wanted the end to function as an apotheosis, and Morris appears to have respected this wish. The lovers are not shown living happily ever after, either in Verona or in any other recognizable setting; rather, they are shown dancing in an ambiguous, star-filled environment, which Simon Morrison has aptly described as a "dreamscape" or an "unsullied Apollonian landscape" (Morrison 2009b, 9).
14. An *arabesque* — a pose that involves standing on one leg, with the other leg extended straight behind. Incidentally, this is the same pose that opens Romeo's entrance in Nureyev's version.

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