WHEREFORE ART THOU *ROMEO*?

Back with the Chicago Symphony, where thou dost belong

By Dennis Polkow

Sergei Prokofiev

In January 1937 composer Sergei Prokofiev came to Chicago at the invitation of then Chicago Symphony Orchestra Music Director Frederick Stock to conduct the CSO in the American premiere of music from his ballet setting of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Prokofiev was eager to make the trip, as Chicago was a city that he knew well and loved greatly. This was the composer's fifth visit to the city, which had been the site of several American premieres of his works throughout the years and, during most of 1921, his home. That was the year that Prokofiev oversaw the world premieres of two major works: his Third Piano Concerto—which Prokofiev himself performed downtown with the CSO—and his opera *The Love for Three Oranges* for the Chicago Opera Association, which the composer conducted at the Auditorium Theatre.

On this occasion, however, Prokofiev had another agenda in wanting to come to Chicago at that particular juncture: his ballet of *Romeo and Juliet* had yet to be presented. Prokofiev was determined that his music be heard, despite the delays in getting it staged back home in Russia.

Prokofiev had originally composed *Romeo and Juliet* on commission from the Kirov Ballet. He had wanted a full-length and "lyrical" subject, and when Kirov director Sergei Radlov suggested setting the Shakespeare play of doomed lovers as a ballet, Prokofiev was inspired by the idea. He had already begun composing the music when the two sat down in early 1935 to set out the general scenario of the narrative in dance form, and Prokofiev subsequently spent the summer of 1935 completing the score. Curiously, that initial scenario had a "happy" ending for the couple. Prokofiev later apologetically explained this initial "barbarism" in his autobiography as "purely choreographic: living people can dance, the dying cannot."

That original version was never publicly mounted. The notorious *Pravda* editorial "Chaos instead of Music" criticizing Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* and other "degenerate" Soviet modern music was published in January 1936. Often attributed to Josef Stalin, the editorial brought a grinding, though temporary, halt to Shostakovich's

career and had a stifling effect on all national projects. Not helping matters was that, like Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*, Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* was also modern music with Shakespearian associations.

Seeking to look as if the company had taken the Stalinist edicts seriously, the Kirov went on a purge of its "avant garde" artists, and Radlov was ousted as its director. Plans to mount Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* were cancelled. The Bolshoi Theatre picked it up with the stipulation that Shakespeare's tragic ending be preserved, but the Bolshoi ended up backing out as well, ultimately pronouncing Prokofiev's music un-danceable.

Attempting to find other outlets where his *Romeo and Juliet* music could get out and be heard, Prokofiev arranged two orchestral suites of seven pieces each from the score and arranged ten piano pieces from it during 1936 and '37. Ravinia music director James Conlon has arranged his own suite from the complete ballet and will conduct it with the same Chicago Symphony Orchestra on August 5 as part of this season's *One Score, One Chicago* initiative.

James Conlon

The complete ballet was finally given in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1938, a quiet event that Prokofiev did not participate in or attend. The Russian premiere took place in 1940—at the Kirov Theater that had originally commissioned it—but during the rehearsals, Prokofiev's music was reviled and ridiculed by the choreographer Leonid Lavrovsky, prima ballerina Galina Ulanova (Juliet), the dancers and even the orchestra, which threatened a walkout. Satirizing the Prince's last line of the play, the creative team spawned the adage, "Never was a story of greater woe than Prokofiev's music for *Romeo*." And yet despite such animosity from those involved with it, Prokofiev had the last laugh: the ballet was well received and became a huge success for all involved. The work has remained a staple of the ballet repertoire ever since.

Of the many celebrated international productions of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, the 1965 staging by Kenneth MacMillan for the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden is particularly remembered as an early career highlight for the legendary dance partnership of veteran ballerina Margot Fonteyn with the then-recently defected young Russian ballet superstar Rudolf Nureyev.

Prokofiev's colorful instrumentation is unique and notable for its expansive wind section, which memorably includes the tenor saxophone as a lead instrument, piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two English horns, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon. The brass section includes the cornet, the battery of percussion

includes piano and celesta—with organ as a third keyboard instrument— and the string section is augmented by two mandolins and the viola d'amore (for Italian flavor) as well as two harps.

But it is the composer's remarkable juxtaposition of lyrical melodies alongside contrasting, at times even jarring, countermelodies and harmonic dissonances that can be whimsical, brutal or poignant in evoking the many moods and emotions of Shakespeare's play that continue to make Prokofiev's music for *Romeo and Juliet* as popular in the concert hall as it is in the theater.

OTHER ROMEOS AND JULIETS

By John Schauer

William Shakespeare

The subject of Ravinia's *One Score, One Chicago* program this year is Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet*. If there were a ratings system for great love affairs in history, chances are the highest rank would be given to those two. Our culture is rife with references to those two "star-cross'd lovers," and even the least well-read individual who has no idea who King Lear is or thinks that Hamlet is an omelet made with ham, will recognize the title of what is arguably Shakespeare's best-known play.

Actually, their love inspired more than Shakespeare, and their tale of woe was told several times before the Bard set pen to parchment sometime between 1591 and 1596. There were previous English sources from 1562 (Arthur Brooke's *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet*) and 1567 (William Painter's *Rhomeo and Julietta*), both of them based on a 1559 French version by Pierre Boaisteau. Boaisteau drew upon Matteo Bandello's 1554 *Romeo e Giulietta*, which in turn was inspired by Luigi da Porto's *Giulietta e Romeo* (ca. 1530), the first version to set the story in Verona and to give the protagonists the names by which they have become immortal.

The great fascination the world has had for the tragic teen love story has resulted in numerous musical works inspired by it. But ever since William Shakespeare retold the tale, it has been his version against which all others are measured—and usually found wanting. [See "Romeo and Juliet at the Movies."] Shakespeare's works, in general, have not yielded a high number of operatic settings. The general consensus is that his poetry is so rich that music is almost superfluous, and opera librettos generally demand a much more concise text, so that precious little of the original is left. The story was set in operas by Benda (1776), Schwanenberger (1776), Marescalchi (1789), Rumling (1790),

Dalayrac (1792), Steibelt (1793), Zingarelli (1796), Porta (1809), Guglielmi (1810), Vaccai (1825), Torriani (1828), Bellini (1830), Storch (1863), Morales (1863) and Marchetti (1865), but the composer most associated with the story by operaphiles is Charles Gounod, whose setting dates from 1867. The libretto is by Jules Barbier and Michel Carré, the same team that created the play upon which Jacques Offenbach based his only opera, *Les contes d'Hoffmann* ("The Tales of Hoffmann").

Gounod is probably best-known to today's opera audiences as the composer of *Faust*, which premiered in 1859 in Paris and by the end of the century was the most frequently performed work at the Paris Opéra (it has also been logged as the eighth-most-frequently performed work at the Metropolitan Opera in New York). His *Roméo et Juliette* is not frequently performed and most listeners know it only by Juliette's entrance aria, the lilting waltz "Je veux vivre."

Charles Gounod

The only other operatic setting of Romeo and Juliet apt to be familiar to today's opera enthusiasts—and then mainly through recordings—is Vincenzo Bellini's I Capuleti e I Montecchi, a rarity that claims our attention partly because of Bellini's relatively small output of operas: where Rossini, for instance, had produced nearly 40 operas in his two decades of opera composition, and Donizetti produced more than 70 in 28 years, Bellini composed at the rate of approximately one opera a year; and since he died before his 34th birthday, his total output consisted of only 10 operas.

Where Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* adheres rather closely to Shakespeare's play, Bellini's librettist, Felice Romani, actually turned to earlier versions of the story for his new version. In this one, Romeo and Juliet are not merely the adolescent victims of their parents' feauding families; rather, Romeo is the leader of the Montagues, making him much more involved in the families' conflict. In fact, before the opera's action begins, Romeo has been away from Verona for some time, having earlier killed Capellio's son, Juliet's brother. Romani deviates from the story as we know it in many other ways, perhaps the most striking of which is having Giulietta awaken from her sleeping potion before Romeo's poison has had its full effect. There is an obvious musical reason for this—of course the composer wanted a chance to write a wonderfully passionate duet at the story's climactic point—but there is plenty of non-operatic precedent for this little adjustment: It appeared in Bandello's 1554 version and was incorporated in Shakespeare's play itself starting with Thomas Otway's 1679 adaptation Caius Marius (with the setting changed to the Roman Republic) and continuing through later stagings by Theophilus Cibber (1744) and David Garrick (1748).

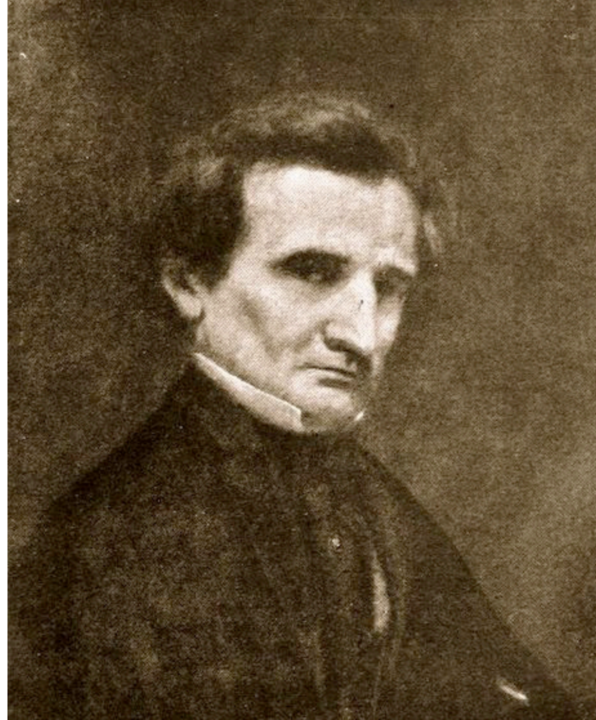
Vincenzo Bellini

Perhaps the main reason Bellini's version has not become firmly entrenched in the standard repertoire, despite its magnificent music, is the fact that the role of Romeo was composed to be sung by a female mezzo-soprano, and today's audiences have been reluctant to see history's most famous lovers portrayed by two women. In 1966 Claudio Abbado, leading a production at La Scala in Milan, began the unfortunate practice of transposing the role of Romeo down an octave for a tenor. Yet we must remember that in Shakespeare's time, the female roles were usually performed by boys, and in Bellini's day, "trouser roles" for women were commonplace, both in opera and ballet; women artists were supposedly more appropriate for roles displaying tender emotions. So it is perhaps appropriate that after nearly two centuries of additions and revisions that were freely made to Shakespeare's play, it was an American actress, Charlotte Cushman, who restored Shakespeare's original text, when she portrayed Romeo opposite the Juliet of her younger sister Susan in a production that toured England in 1845.

Neither Bellini's nor Gounod's operas, however, ever achieved the world-wide acclaim accorded three later musical versions of the story of Romeo and Juliet, all of which were explicitly derived from Shakespeare without having to compete with him: Hector Belioz's 1839 "dramatic symphony" *Roméo et Juliette* uses voices only in brief portions before the magnificent vocal finale, and both Tchaikovsky's famous concert overture and Prokofiev's ballet have no text whatsoever. Where operatic composers were forced to use diluted reworkings of Shakespeare's words, these later versions avoid that impasse altogether and simply evoke the emotional aura of the famous play.

Although Berlioz was familiar with the play through translation, his first exposure to a staged performance was in a language he did not yet understand, when he saw a touring English theatrical company's performance of Romeo and Juliet in addition to several additional Shakespeare plays. A great deal of the excitement he experienced, however, may have had less to do with Shakespeare than with the young actress who was his first Juliet, Harriet Smithson. After first seeing her in 1827, he became absolutely obsessed with her. Nowadays Ms. Smithson would probably have sought a legal injunction against this overly emotional stalker, but at the time she was won over by his sincerity—his most famous composition, the *Symphonie fantastique*, was inspired by her as well—and in 1833 she succumbed to his proposal for marriage, a union that was ultimately to prove disastrously unhappy for both of them.

It is telling that in Berlioz's version, voices, both solo and choral, are used to summarize the action in a prologue, a tenor solo recreates Mercutio's speech about Queen Mab, and choral passages depict the Capulets' departure from a party and, later, Juliet's funeral cortege; but no singer ever portrays either of the two lovers. They were to be depicted by Berlioz in orchestral passages of aching emotional intensity, but he saves his overwhelming choral finale (inspired by Beethoven's Ninth Symphony) for the final scene where Friar Laurence mediates between the two warring families. He thus makes his greatest emotional impact not with the deaths of the young lovers, but with the reconciliation of the Montagues and Capulets, a bit of plot only touched upon by Shakespeare and ignored completely in the operatic settings by Bellini and Gounod.



Hector Berlioz

Towards the end of his life, when he had become increasingly disillusioned and bitter, Berlioz was convinced by the Grand Duchess Helen of Russia in 1867 to embark upon a concert tour to her country, which included two performance of *Roméo et Juliette* in Moscow with 500 performers before audiences totaling 12,400. One member of the audience would have been Peter Ilyitch Tchaikovsky, who had moved to Moscow the previous year to take up a position as teacher of harmony at what was to become the Moscow Conservatory. There he met not only Berlioz, but also the famous Russian nationalist composer Mily Balakirev, who suggested to Tchaikovsky that he compose a symphonic poem on the subject of Romeo and Juliet.

Tchaikovsky showed his work-in-progress to Balakirev and rewrote it several times, following suggestions made by his mentor. Considering that the piece is now among the most popular compositions of all time, and that the famous love theme may be one of the most recognizable tunes in the entire orchestral repertoire—a universal evocation of amorous passion—it is amusing today to read some of Balakirev's criticisms. Writing of that famous love theme, Balakirev complained, "It does not sufficiently express a mystic, inward, spiritual love, but rather a fantastic passionate glow which has hardly any nuance of Italian sentiment. Romeo and Juliet were not Persian lovers, but Europeans."

Tchaikovsky was to revise the score numerous times before achieving the form in which we now know it, an acknowledged masterpiece. Yet while it may be the most successful (judging from frequency of performance and audience reaction) musical interpretation of Shakespeare's play, it is in part because Tchaikovsky was attempting less, distilling the

story's essence into a fantasia of kaleidoscopic emotions, with no attempt at a linear narration of the story.

Sergei Prokofiev

The next enduring musical work based on the Romeo and Juliet theme was created by another Russian composer, Sergei Prokofiev, whose ballet setting is the subject of *One Score, One Chicago*. Interestingly enough, while the score has always found acceptance and won over audiences around the world, the staged ballet experienced more difficulties. Originally suggested by the Kirov Ballet, that company eventually canceled its commission, which was then taken up by the Bolshoi. The dancers pronounced the music "undanceable"—a condemnation once heaped upon Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*—and the premiere was again postponed. Meanwhile Prokofiev made two orchestral suites out of his score (a third would come later), which he first presented in 1936 and '37. Written in a style calculated to be easily digested by Soviet authorities, the music won popular approval on its own before the ballet was ever danced at all, in a 1938 production at the Brno Opera in Czechoslovakia. It was restaged in 1940, finally, at the Kirov, but neither this version nor any of the others that followed ever achieved the status of "standard" in the sense that all subsequent versions of *Swan Lake* are indebted to the choreography of Marius Petipa. Pondering this situation in the *New York Times* of March 15, 1981, Jack Anderson observed, "certain compositions—for example, many famous symphonies—can seem so self-sufficient that choreography to them may strike audiences as irrelevant. *Romeo and Juliet*, although composed for dancing, may be such a score."

But the challenge of transforming Romeo and Juliet into a musical format has continued to intrigue composers, and less than two decades after the inauspicious birth of Prokofiev's ballet came yet another mold into which the subject was poured, this time (1957) as an American musical, *West Side Story*. Containing what is most likely Leonard Bernstein's finest score, with lyrics by the then newly emerging genius of the musical stage, Stephen Sondheim, *West Side Story* was an unquestionable landmark in the history of Broadway shows and later an equally successful film adaptation, winning 10 Academy Awards in 1961.

The dramatic adjustments made this time were among the most radical yet, being set in 1950s Manhattan with the two Veronese families becoming American and Puerto Rican street gangs, but some of the devices have precedent—Tony (Romeo) in this version kills the brother of Maria (Juliet), just as Bellini's Romeo had killed Capellio's son. But this

time, only one of the lovers (Tony) dies, and the composer does not even attempt to translate this painful moment into music. Maria (Juliet) struggles to rekindle the musical vision they had shared of a happy future, but she does so in an *a cappella* vacuum, and *West Side Story* makes its final emotional impact through her concluding speech to the rival gangs, not through song.

West Side Story

In a way, the story that Shakespeare immortalized has come full circle: from opera to dramatic symphony to tone poem to ballet to a Broadway musical with heavily operatic leanings, the tale of Romeo and Juliet has been set into every conceivable genre, each offering some new solutions to the challenge of translating one of the world's most familiar and best-loved stories. As we progress into the still-young 21st century, who knows in what form today's young artists will cast this tale of overwhelming—and immortal—love?

ROMEO AND JULIET AT THE MOVIES

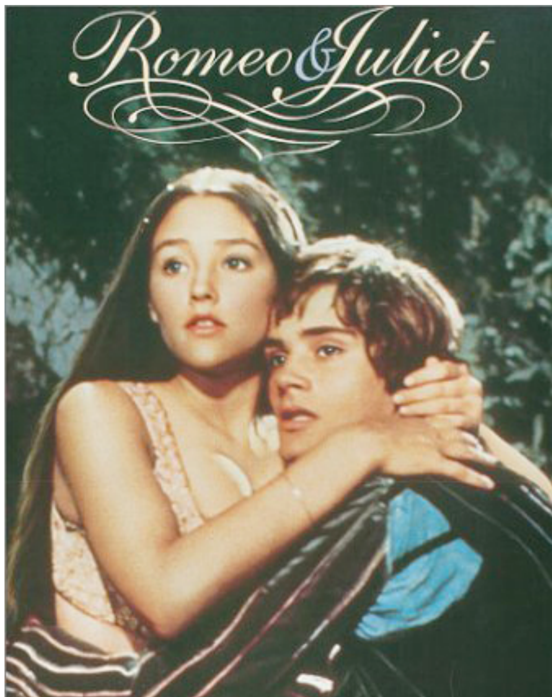
By John Schauer

Shakespeare's actual play has been filmed numerous times, but the three most notable film adaptations have been George Cukor's 1936 version for MGM, Franco Zefirelli's 1968 production and Baz Luhrman's 1996 take on the story.

MGM undertook its pioneering version as one of the "prestige" pictures the studio (the biggest in Hollywood) could afford to make—unlike today's filmmakers, for whom each project can spell blockbuster success or financial disaster. Irving Thalberg, the wunderkind who actually ran the artistic side of the studio that most people perceived as being under the dictatorship of Louis B. Mayer, was the uncredited producer (he routinely refused to list his name in his films' credits, saying, "Credit you give yourself is not worth having"). In the title roles he cast his wife, Norma Shearer, and British actor Leslie Howard (best known today as Ashley in *Gone with the Wind*), both major stars at the time.

The project was a labor of love for producer Thalberg; Nicholas Schenck, the head of MGM's parent company, dismissed it as "a silly idea," but Thalberg went all out, commissioning a thousand individually created Renaissance costumes, building sets on an unprecedented scale and hiring dance legend Agnes de Mille as choreographer and Shakespearean authority William Strunk Jr. of Cornell University as a literary consultant. The lavish black-and-white production oozes the sumptuous gloss that was the hallmark of major MGM releases, and earned four Academy Award nominations (for Shearer, for Basil Rathbone in the supporting role category as Tybalt, for art direction, and for best picture). Film historian Mark A. Vieira has described the finished film as "the most carefully researched, expertly advised, thoroughly rehearsed, beautifully designed, lavishly mounted, magnificently photographed, skillfully edited film of the year."

Although respectfully received by the critics, it lost money at the box office, largely because Shakespeare was not a big attraction for American movie audiences—even Broadway productions of Shakespeare were a rarity. Today the film's box office losses are often attributed to the fact that both its leads were too old to portray the teenaged lovers; in the play, Juliet was just shy of her 14th birthday, and Romeo was not much older, around 16, while at the time the MGM film was made, Shearer was 34 and Howard 43. But theatrical conventions were different in those days; Katherine Cornell had scored a triumph as Juliet on Broadway in 1933, when she was nearly 37; and in 1940 the leads were undertaken by Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, then age 33 and 27, respectively. (Even in Paul Czinner's 1966 film of the Royal Ballet production of Prokofiev's ballet, the leads were danced by Rudolph Nureyev, then 28, and Margot Fonteyn, who was a venerable 47.) Audiences in those days did not expect true-life realism. Consider that the year after *Romeo and Juliet*, Viennese actress Luise Rainer won an Academy Award playing a Chinese peasant woman in MGM's production of *The Good Earth*.



So it was perceived as a radical innovation when Franco Zeffirelli chose two unknowns who were actual teenagers, Olivia Hussy (15) and Leonard Whiting (17), as the lovers in his 1968 production of *Romeo and Juliet*. The film, which was wildly successful both with critics and with audiences, exemplifies Zeffirelli's fanatic attention to period detail and décor and has been lauded as one of the most gorgeous films ever made of a Shakespeare play—both the cinematography and costume design won Oscars, and the director and picture were both nominated as well.

Youth again was a factor when Baz Luhrmann applied his unique touch to *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* (the official full title) in 1996: Claire Danes was 17 and Leonardo DiCaprio not yet 22 when they took on the famous roles. Both of them earned favorable notices for their acting and the chemistry they exhibited onscreen, and the film's box office success (netting $40 million in the United States alone) allowed DiCaprio to make the transition from art house favorite to mainstream heartthrob. But the film has won most of its admirers and detractors based upon viewer reaction to Luhrmann's over-the-top modernization of the story and dazzlingly sensational visual imagery. Although the dialogue is not rewritten, the setting has been updated to modern-day Florida, with the Montagues and Capulets portrayed as gun-wielding street gangs. It is amusing to note, however, that while the inhabitants of the fictitious suburb of Verona Beach have television sets, modern cars, helicopters, assault guns and recreational drugs, they do not seem to possess telephones, which would have allowed the protagonists to avoid their tragic end. Lurhmann also fiddles a bit with the scene in the Capulet tomb by having Juliet awaken from her potion before Romeo actually expires from poison.

Other versions have been made and additional ones undoubtedly will join the list. Earlier this year Walt Disney Studios' Touchstone Pictures division released *Gnomeo and Juliet*, an animated adaptation in which the characters are garden gnome statues that come to life when human beings are not around, the division between the Montagues and Capulets in this instance being marked by one side having red caps, the other blue. The movie, which was not a major hit, may have ditched Shakespeare's immortal poetry, but it is probably the first film portrayal of the "star-cross'd lovers" in 3-D.