

Shostakovich: Festive Overture (1947/1954)

Like most Russians of his generation, Shostakovich had been an excited teenager in the heady days of the Revolution. He basically believed in Soviet Socialism all his life, even though by the end, after Khrushchev's de-Stalinisation programme began in 1956, no idealist could still believe that the Soviet Union had remained on Lenin's path of progress. It was only after that process of disillusion that the music of Shostakovich would take new and ultimately bitter directions. The modern orthodoxy that Shostakovich was secretly a closet dissident, whose real feelings were repressed by a fearful tyranny, is all so much eyewash, a Western myth to satisfy those who cannot accept that he was never 'one of us' politically. On the contrary, even when things were bad he basically envied the West nothing.

This overture was originally commissioned in 1947 to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the Revolution. The date of composition is uncertain, but it eventually appeared in 1954, a year after the death of Stalin, while he was still seen as the hero who led the Soviet people in the defeat of Hitler. The last major work before this was the mighty Tenth Symphony. That was in effect Stalin's funeral ode, but its positive finale says that despite the tragic loss of one hero, the march of the people goes on. So there is really no need to 're-interpret' the sunny optimism of the Festive Overture as some kind of sarcastically disguised misery. Shostakovich really did mean what he said and say what he meant.

Shostakovich inherited Tchaikovsky's gift of seeming to portray a succession of Russian character types in instrumental music: almost a compressed ballet of the imagination. Here a rollicking sailor's dance leads the procession of rejoicing peasants and happy workers. Before, between and after them strides a mighty colossus, the Soviet people embodied in one towering hero. If nowadays we cannot share the political evaluation, we can nevertheless relish the sheer *joie de vivre* of a time when the future still seemed bright.

Prokofiev: Selections from Romeo and Juliet Op.64

Prokofiev left the Soviet Union in 1918, after being stranded in Vladivostok on Central Committee business and unable to return overland to Moscow because of civil war. (That, at least, was his version of the story.) After living for one and a half decades on engagements in America and Europe he had decided by 1934 to return to live in the Soviet Union, though his return was a long process phased over the next two years, which spanned the creation of this music.

Romeo and Juliet, like almost all his stage works, had a troubled genesis. He had barely finished Lieutenant Kije and the Second Violin Concerto when the Kirov Ballet of Leningrad proposed he should write a full-length ballet on Shakespeare's romantic tragedy. He composed most of the music quickly as a piano score in Paris in a few months in the Spring of 1935. The Kirov backed out, but Moscow's Bolshoi Ballet took up the project, and persuaded him to alter his original plan

which had been to change the end of the story for balletic reasons. Then the Bolshoi decided his music was undanceable, and they too backed out. He made extensive revisions before the end of 1935 and prepared the first two orchestral suites. Eventually the Kirov took it up again. The ballet was premiered in December 1938 during their tour of Czechoslovakia, and is now a major staple of repertoire for the larger companies. The first two orchestral suites had already been published in 1936, and it is from these that tonight's selection has been drawn. We have chosen to perform these excerpts in storyline order, as follows.

Synopsis with musical selections

Act I Scene 1 - a street in Verona in the early morning. As the curtain rises, Romeo Montague is wandering pensively.

- **Scene** (Suite 1/2) More townspeople enter, and the street comes to life. A fight develops between the rival men of the Montagues and the Capulets, which ends with the arrival of the powerful presence of...
- **The Prince** (Suite 2/1 up to fig.2) who orders the two patricians Montague and Capulet to make their men keep the peace, and sends everyone home.

Act I Scene 2 - Capulet's house the same evening.

- **Juliet as a young girl** (Suite 2/2) is with her nurse, dressing for the ball to celebrate her betrothal to Paris.
- **Masks** (Suite 1/5) Romeo, Mercutio and other Montague lads are larking around. They mask up and gatecrash the Capulet ball, where in the...
- **Dance of the Knights** (Suite 2/1 from Fig.2 on) the Capulet men dance a virile step during which, in a gentler interlude, Juliet dances very formally with Paris. After more dances...
- **Madrigal** (Suite 1/3) is the moment when Romeo and Juliet's eyes meet. Juliet's cousin Tybalt recognises Romeo. Capulet insists on peace, but the Montague lads are evicted. The ball ends with the magnificent Gavotte (from the Classical Symphony). After dark, Romeo returns secretly to meet Juliet for the...
- **Balcony Scene and Love Dance** (Suite 1/6).

Act II Scene 1 - the street the next morning. Townspeople are about. Juliet's nurse finds Romeo and gives him the ring Juliet has sent. Act II Scene 2 - Romeo and Juliet meet at the cell of Friar Lawrence, where they are secretly married. Act II Scene 3 - the street later in the day. Townspeople are still about. Montague and Capulet men are at a stand-off. Mercutio taunts Tybalt and, as they parry, Mercutio is accidentally killed. Defying the Prince's order Romeo, in a fit of blind rage, swears vengeance.

- **Duel and Death of Tybalt** (Suite 1/7). In the reckless fight that ensues Tybalt is killed. Romeo is now a fugitive.

Act III Scene 1 - Juliet's bedroom the next morning. Romeo has hidden here for the night with his secret bride.

- **Romeo at Juliet's before parting** (Suite 2/5) The stage action is restrained, but the music says enough. (The musical picture of the sea may be a reminder that Prokofiev also did film work.)

After their long farewell, Romeo flees into exile with the morning light. The family now pressurise Juliet to marry Paris. Act III Scene 2 - Juliet visits Friar Lawrence again, who gives her the sleeping draught with which she can simulate her death. Act III Scene 3 - in Capulet's house Juliet has taken the draught. Paris comes to court her with a mandolin serenade and dancing maidens bearing lilies, but finds her apparently dead.

Act IV (Epilogue). Juliet is laid to rest in the Capulet tomb. Romeo, hearing reports of her death, has secretly returned from exile to see for himself. After the funeral mourners have departed he enters the tomb.

- **Romeo at the grave of Juliet** (Suite 2/7). In his grief he kills himself at her side. Juliet awakens and, finding Romeo dead beside her, stabs herself. A few onlookers enter timorously. Curtain.

Sibelius: Symphony no. 2 in D Major Op.43

The Second Symphony, completed in 1901 shortly before the Violin Concerto, was the product of a rising tide of Finnish Nationalism at a time when Tsarist Russia was eroding the country's traditional semi-autonomy, but Sibelius makes no reference to Finland's fairly undistinguished folk music. Rather, he creates music from a rich collection of near-cinematic musical icons that manage to suggest unspecified narrative or pictorial content, evoking the traditions of storytelling and magnificent landscape in general terms only, so that musical form is in no way constrained by programmatic content. On the contrary, these motifs are developed into movements which are exquisitely formed musical objects – romance and classicism integrated, the best of both worlds.

- **I. Allegretto** When we think of Finland we usually see frozen wasteland, forest, lakes and mountains. Yet most Finns live by the seaboard, and much of the saga tradition is nautical. The sonata form first movement could almost be a sea picture.
- **II. Tempo Andante** The second movement may be the apotheosis of all coming-of-age quest sagas. The opening seems to portray a long journey, then leads through a succession of incidents to the fight and arrival at manhood which is the goal of all such tales.

- **III. Vivacissimo/Lento e suave** High action (dancing waves, galloping hooves or flashing swords) alternates with a yieldingly romantic (amatory?) interlude, leading without a break into...
- **IV. Finale (Allegro moderato)** The finale is usually described as a nationalist hymn, but it is surely more. The quotation of the sea motif from Rimsky-Korsakov's Scheherazade (1888), whether deliberate or subliminal, is surely significant, as is the broodingly becalmed second subject. Perhaps sails rather than flags are flying in the grand chorale which brings the heroic symphonic journey home.

Bob Thomas, 2001