

**a** **PROKOFIEV** *Romeo and Juliet* • Vasily Petrenko, cond; Oslo PO • LAWQ  
1105 (2 CDs: 144:48)



Sergei Prokofiev: *Romeo and Juliet*, Op. 64

*Romeo and Juliet* is at very least Prokofiev's masterpiece *and* the great full-length ballet of the 20th century; in all probability, it's also the greatest evening-length ballet there is. The only real competition would come from Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* or *The Sleeping Beauty*, but both of them are fairy tales: one rather silly, the other understandably snoozy. (Think about it: In the first a Prince falls in love with a bird, in the other a Prince finally shows up after not that much has actually happened. The music in both is magnificent, of course; the drama laughable, as it is in most 19th-century ballets.) If it might be argued that in the treatment by Adrian Piotrovsky—who was murdered in 1937 during the Great Purge—and Sergei Radlov, Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers also become rather cartoonish (until a very late stage in the ballet's composition the story was to have ended happily), then they are still recognizably *human* characters, involved in a gripping human tragedy for which Prokofiev produced his most poetic, absorbing, and shattering music.

Any new recording of the complete ballet needs to get past a pair of classic versions both available at a bargain price: André Previn and the London Symphony (Warner Classics 67701—\$12.99) and Lorin Maazel's best outing *ever* with the Cleveland Orchestra (Decca 452 970—\$19.99). Previn's understanding of the score's cinematic potential—in the best possible sense—has been unrivalled for more than four decades: No recorded performance has made the action come alive more vividly, or was more perfectly attuned to the dramatic implications of each individual dance. Less theatrical than Previn, Maazel had perhaps a firmer grasp on the overall architecture of the piece—*Romeo and Juliet* as dramatic symphony—to say nothing of the spectacular playing of what was still very much George Szell's Cleveland Orchestra and Decca's equally stunning recorded sound.

If Petrenko doesn't *quite* match the immediacy of the Previn or the virtuosity of the Maazel, then it's a very close run thing on both counts, which would seem to make this the most completely satisfying *Romeo and Juliet* on the market today. From the impassioned string playing in the *Introduction*—intense, immaculately phrased, but never overdone—it's clear from the outset that here's a performance that's going to tug at the heartstrings in all the right way. And indeed, at no point does it ever stoop to bathos or sentimentality. What it offers is playing of such point and character that the music leaps off the page: from the droll humor of *Masks*, the brutality of the *Dance of the Knights*, to the chaste ardor of the *Balcony Scene* and *Love Dance*. While everything has obviously been prepared meticulously—

paragraphs could be written about the closely observed details in virtually every scene—the

illusion that it's all being done naturally and spontaneously makes you stop paying attention to the details and allow yourself to be swept up—irresistibly—into the drama.

If under Mariss Jansons the Oslo Philharmonic began its transformation into one of Europe's finest orchestras, then that transformation is now unmistakably complete, while the recorded sound is warm, detailed, and perfectly natural. No matter how many *R&Js* you might have crowding the shelves, make room for this one. **Jim Svejda**

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