

CLASSICAL CD

by Ivan Hewett

Prokofiev: *Romeo and Juliet*

Oslo Philharmonic cond.
Vasily Petrenko

LAWO CLASSICS

★★★★★



Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* is one of the sure-fire hits in the ballet repertoire, but many find it hard to take. For some it shows the sad decline of the great Russian ballet tradition of Tchaikovsky and Petipa, after it became a tool of the Soviet regime. The emotions are shallow, they say, and the colours relentlessly gaudy. Shakespeare's great tragedy becomes an excuse for spectacle.

It is true that Prokofiev

composed the ballet following his return to the Soviet Union after a hectic life as a star of the musical circuit in Europe and the United States, as both virtuoso pianist and composer. He now had to toe the line, ideologically speaking, and the tortuous history of the ballet's premiere shows his struggles. The original 1935 ballet had a happy ending, which chimed in with Prokofiev's curious view that the protagonists didn't really die at all - they were released from the false reality of their Earthly being. Soviet officials were not pleased and the original tragic ending was restored. But objections to the ballet's supposed "difficulty" led Prokofiev to revise the score,

which was not produced in the Soviet Union until 1940.

Prokofiev drew three orchestral suites from the ballet, and it's in this form that we normally hear the piece. This new recording from Vasily Petrenko and the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra offers us the whole ballet, which has both pros and cons. The suites omit some ingenious and touching little episodes, but also some routine ones. The big advantage is that the dramatic shape of the ballet is preserved.

The new recording has some strong competition. Lorin Maazel's version with the Cleveland Orchestra has the brilliant garishness of a historical pageant, which some would say is exactly right. Valery Gergiev's

recent version with the London Symphony Orchestra has more emotional amplitude, and a surprising delicacy for a conductor who can be on the coarse side.

This new version is less brilliant in sound than the LSO's version, but is none the worse for that. Petrenko tones down the brashness of the scoring in famous numbers such as "The Fight", and his slow tempo for the Act Two finale brings out a gravity in the music. The delicate numbers, for example the "Dance of the Girls with Lilies", are genuinely touching, and the virtuoso ones prove that the Oslo Philharmonic has what it takes to play this hugely taxing score.