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[00:00:05] Never was a story of more woe than Prokofiev's music for Romeo. That's what dancer Galena Ulanova said after the complete flop of Sergei Prokofiev's setting of Romeo and Juliet. I'm Colleen Phelps, and this is classically speaking. Boy meets girl, boy and girl's feuding families absolutely destroy the happy couple. And it ends with a lot of death. Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet has been set to music by dozens of composers. In tone poem, opera and ballet. But it would be hard to beat the drama behind the scenes of Sergei Prokofiev's version. The political situation in 1930s Russia was tricky for artists. You couldn't be too formal and classical because that's not toeing the Communist Party line. And you couldn't be too experimental because then you'd be with the newspaper Pravda called a degenerate modernist. One false move in the government's eyes could lead to imprisonment or worse. Now, Sergei Prokofiev really tried to stay out of politics. Except he took Romeo and Juliet and gave it a happy ending with the couple alive and well.

[00:01:45] You know, that is something that has always intrigued me, and Prokofiev, believed in it completely. And he just said, as you know, of dead people can't dance. So I have to change the ending.

[00:01:57] That's conductor Joann Falletta. She led the Nashville Symphony in a performance of music from the ballet last season. And she pointed out another factor that may have doomed Prokofiev's rendition even after he restored the original tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet. It was really hard.

[00:02:23] I think about that a lot, because when he was talked into say, you know, why his friends? No, no, you have to keep the ending. He devised a way. I mean, depending on the extraordinary strength of the Kirov dancers that Romeo actually dances a good part of the ending. Holding the body of Juliet in his arms. And the original choreography because she is dead. And imagine the strength, the majesty, the emotion that you would feel seeing that. So it came at a price and it came at the price of the dancers having to agree to to really make this tragic ending work physically. But they did it.

[00:03:18] It's interesting that you pointed out the strength of the dancers, because when I talked to Paul Vasterling, the director of National Ballet about The Nutcracker, he was talking about the original Petipa choreography and how they didn't do lifts then they just did not. That was not the strength that male dancers were required to have. So that must have really like a huge feat of strength.

[00:03:41] It did. I mean, it was un danceable is what they said un danceable. So I think that's why it was put on hold for a while. And in fact, these suites were played before the full ballet was played because Prokofiev didn't want give up on the music. You know, you run into a, you know, a kind of a big, big problem in the dance world. But he believed in this music, so he started to extract orchestral sections that could be played in. And they've had a great success.

[00:04:42] When they postponed. Which I also read was because of the time signatures being so complicated, they found, the dancers, found it very difficult. Little did they know what was coming up.

[00:04:53] So which is funny cause nineteen thirty five, I guess when he wrote it. That's after the Rite of Spring.

[00:04:59] I know, I know. But I guess it just was not something they were so used to. Well, you know, you read stories about the dancers humming melodies under their breath that they can dance to because they can't dance to what they're hearing or counting in odd ways to just to stay together. It wasn't it wasn't an artistic issue. It wasn't a musical issue. They were just basically trying to stay together with these odd rhythms. And it doesn't strike us like that. I think at all anymore. But it's interesting to know how this sort of difficult beginnings of these great pieces.

[00:05:46] As is the custom, you've put the suite together from Prokofiev's three suites for the piece. So what was your priority in stacking that up? Did you want to choose just the best movements in the best music or did you want to tell that story in the suite?

[00:06:01] Both, Colleen. In a way, because I felt that the trajectory of the music had to take us from the, you know, the arrogance of the Capulets and Montagues at the beginning of the ballet were there deliberately snubbing each other in the street. And, you know, promenading of who is wealthier or who has more children or who is know more important or whatever. We had to start with that. And then to go through Juliet as a young girl where she's, you know, not even grown up yet. But but she's starting to have adult thoughts. She's starting to feel the inkling of what love might be like to take it through, though, all of those steps to the very end where he is. He's just bereft. I mean, he's lost his world at that point. So and of course, I chose the pieces I thought were the strongest and the amazing. The death of Tybalt is something out of this world because, you know, Tybalt and Mercure are characters that are like foils to Romeo and Juliet mawkishness his cousin, who is, you know, always fooling around. And. And Tybalt is Juliet's cousin. Somehow this kind of horseplay gets very nasty, gets very, very dangerous. And Tybalt kills Mercutio in a duel. But the tools that music is like nothing we've ever heard before. It's fantastically difficult. You can actually close your eyes and see the swords flashing at each other or see that this incredible choreography of these two very young, very angry, very hotheaded men fighting each other based upon some sort of a schism in their families that they probably don't even remember how it started. It's going on for centuries. This this. These two warring families. When the final blow comes and Mercutio staggers for a while, we hear that in the music, he's staggering and he dies. It's it's unbelievable. I mean, this is probably one of the greatest moments in the ballet.

[00:08:37] What do you think it is about the march that so? Evocative that it's been used for so many pop cultural things, I mean, somebody just pointed out to me on my way at the office that they've been watching the comic show Watchmen.

[00:08:52] Yeah.

[00:08:52] Which is so popular that I know the bad guy had the march.

[00:08:56] Yeah. It's funny. It's always a sort of a bad theme, right? I mean, it's it's it something like something is going to happen. So I guess Prokofiev was able to write this in a way that he sums up. This is not going to be a happy play like right from the beginning, you know, that this is this is a dark place that they're. But this is always fascinates me to think with the arrogance of this family because they run into each other all the time. I mean, they see each other on the streets all the time, of course. They don't speak to each other. They don't go to parties together. But when they when they pass each other, they're you know, they're leveling the hatred of like 300 years at the person next to them. It's in there. So I guess this power makes it very useful for these kind of dark commercials or

television shows or movies, because it is funny that that's the one movement that everyone knows from Romeo and Juliet.

[00:10:06] So the first thing I did my research on with Romeo and Juliet was to look at the year and I think this happens a lot with Prokofiev that I thought, wow, that's really recent 1938 is really recent.

[00:10:19] It's not even a hundred years old.

[00:10:20] Do you feel a timelessness with pieces like this, especially late romantic pieces?

[00:10:26] I do. It is timeless. I think great art is timeless. And. And even though it is, of course, a product of its time, it has something that goes beyond that, something that makes it comprehensible and inspiring, even to someone. Almost 100 years later, they will still be moved, maybe to tears and listening to this. And you know, Prokofiev. His history is so tragic. I mean, here's a man who was basically apolitical and wants to be apolitical and left Russia after the revolution simply because he wanted to work. And it was not a good place for artists at that time. It was chaotic and then made the decision to come back and I think didn't realize what he was coming back to. It was a terrible nightmare for him. But when he first came back, he did have the chance to write. Some of his greatest music is in some ways summer's most romantic. And Romeo Juliet is one of those scores for sure.

[00:11:24] Then I see a saxophone in the ensemble now, I think. Oh, yeah. OK. 1938. That sounds right. This takes a little preface. But bear with me. So the changed ending was to go with Prokofiev's Christian Science Faith, which I thought was so interesting and it seemed like it would appease the communist censors better than anything else. But it didn't. It was the opposite. And this was the same time that the government was denouncing Shostakovich. And the government in 1935 took over the Bolshoi, also fired the entire staff and had the director executed.

[00:12:09] Oh, my goodness.

[00:12:11] And that's also part of why didn't premiere when it was written. What do you think we have to learn from that generation of composers who wrote while they were afraid?

[00:12:22] I think it teaches us a tremendous lesson about art and censorship, that it cannot exist together or is to express our deepest feelings or our feelings that hide in our hearts artist to express the truth as we see it without fear.

[00:12:48] Joann Falletta and the Nashville Symphony paired Romeo and Juliet with Maurice Ravel's La Valse. Beautifully dramatic programming that became even more profound because of world events the week of the concert. Find out how after the break.

[00:14:39] I interviewed conductor Joann Falletta on January 8th, 2020. That day in retaliation for the American killing of Quassem Suleimani, missile attacks had been carried out on two U.S. Army bases in Iran. At the time, remember, this was January. It seemed like this would be the biggest news story of 2020.

[00:15:00] The program opener La Valse comes from right after World War One and is often painted as the apotheosis of 19th century Europe, meaning the romantic sensibility and its dying. Does it feel profound to bring this program this week that the country is in this tense war like situation in Iran?

[00:15:18] Yes, I mean, this kind of conflict which we see between the families, of course, Romeo Juliet and between the worst war of all time, World War One. I mean, this is this is a destroyed Europe, destroyed a way of life, a destroyed rival in some ways, too. And people who listen to La Valse are often confused by it because they hear the title The Waltz. And it starts out so beautifully. And, you know, everything Ravel wrote is filled with beauty. So it's confusing as the piece goes on. What's happening? It sounds odd. It sounds scary. And they don't understand it. It's, it's exactly Ravel's picture of Europe disintegrating into the war. And he chose something very beautiful to destroy, to make it even more poignant. He chooses the perfect example of gaiety and life and lightness and beauty that the Viennese waltz. He systematically destroys it in this piece and every moment is is breathtakingly beautiful in his orchestration. But he's very clear about how he feels about what this war has done. And, of course, he had the terrible experience of being an ambulance driver in the war. Imagine what he saw behind the front lines in France.

[00:17:11] It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that Joann Falletta is a leader in orchestral music. Over her decades with the Buffalo Philharmonic, she's turned the orchestra into a force in recording American music, championing new works and diverse voices. She's also written quite a bit about the future of the art form.

[00:17:28] Taking you way back now. About 20 years ago, you wrote the article The Complete Music Director. And in it, you faced head on how you felt orchestras should move through the turn of the 21st century. Now, I'm actually going to quote you to you. The orchestra exists not only as a beautiful reflection of a musical past, but as an unerring mirror of current society. What should American orchestras be reflecting?

[00:17:52] It's easy for audiences to revel in the treasures of the past, and we love them. I mean, we are a museum in some ways and we love that. We love having Ravel and Prokofiev and Beethoven. But that's not who we are now. And we need to reflect who we are now. We need to reflect our current time. And who else can tell us that except people who are living now. So I feel very strongly that new music, it has to have a place, a very significant place in what the symphony offers. And our audiences deserve that. You know, they it's not up to them to go out and find seeds of new music that that they'll connect with. We need to introduce things to them all the time and give them a chance to hear. So I really believe that contemporary music has a place and not not ghettoized on an all contemporary music festival, although those have fun. But. But as part of the canon, because they are part of the canon now.

[00:19:02] One of the composers, Falletta champions is Behzad Ranjbaran. This is from a piece of his called The Blood of Seyavash. Ranjbaran describes it as a ballet about destiny, humanity and conspiracy. It also includes a pair of star crossed lovers. You know, just like Romeo and Juliet.

[00:19:37] A lot of conservatory or academic music training is focused on one thing, whether it's finding work with an opera company or playing excerpts on your instrument or analysis. What would you say is happening in the classical world outside of the conservatory? That school's absolutely need to be preparing students for

[00:19:54] Even if you've never played jazz in your life, you have to have a class in jazz. You have to know how people approach that. And it can inform your classical music. You have to do a little bit of composing. You just have to do that. How do I structure my life as a musician? OK, I'm not an orchestra. What do I do? Do I teach? Do I work in a studio? Can I be a recording engineer? Can I be an advocate for music in some other way? And always knew music. I think it's critical to keep playing new music and to keep discovering new music.

[00:20:30] Speaking of being a well rounded musician, Falletta certainly models that behavior in addition to conducting. She's also an actively performing classical guitarist in this recording. She's performing with a member of the Virginia Symphony, a NORFOLK public television.

[00:20:50] How do you keep all of those plates spinning artistically? Do you feel consistent with each one or do you feel like you kind of go in phases where I sort of you sort of back off from conducting and work on a guitar project and come around?

[00:21:03] Well, more in phases. If I know I have a chance to play a concert of guitar concert. I carve out time whether it's getting up extra early in the morning or, you know, staying up late or or, you know, maybe not going to a meeting or two to make that work. So my life is always in a little bit of flux. But but really the last but most of my life has been mostly conducting. So but I love to read I love to write poetry. And that is very that is very sort of as. As the inspiration takes me in. And most of the poems are about music. And how how the effect it's had on my life.

[00:21:45] Since she is a poet, I asked Joann Falletta for what was apparently a first: a reading.

[00:21:52] Music could not stop a war, could not deflect a single bullet, could not prevent one death. No, music could not stop a war. But in its cloistered monastery, it lies dormant, protecting a fragment of nobility, all but forgotten in that time. When we return, wounded and heartbroken, we find in that music some misplaced part of us. Music cannot stop a war, but it can save us from the death of all we are.

[00:22:41] Extras from this interview, including reflection on her time with the women's philharmonic and how being a guitarist made Joann Falletta, a better conductor, are all available on our Web site. 91classical dot org. Concerts may be on hiatus, but classical music is not canceled. It will, however, be changing as life goes on. Keep up on how music moves forward by subscribing to classically speaking here from classical music's insiders as their musical life continues. Classically speaking is a production of Nashville Public Radio's 91Classical. The show is edited by Anita Bugg and engineered by Carl Pedersen. Ballet music from Romeo and Juliet by Sergei Prokofiev was performed by the Buffalo Philharmonic. The blood of Seyavash by Behzad. Ranjbaran was performed by the London Philharmonic and Ravel's La Valse was taken from a live performance by the Nashville Symphony, all conducted by Joann Falletta.