

Program Notes for VSO Concert – Bartók: Piano Concerto #3; Prokofiev: The Love for Three Oranges Suite, and Romeo and Juliet Suite No. 2 – May 1-2, 2026

By Jonathan Berkowitz

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881 to 1945)

“[T]he best way for a composer to reap the full benefits of ... peasant music is to assimilate the idiom so completely that he is able to forget all about it and use it as his musical mother tongue.”

Béla Bartók was a rare synthesis of composer, pianist, and field researcher. While other composers imagined national styles, Bartók carried a phonograph into villages across Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, Bulgaria, and beyond to record and document thousands of folk songs; he did this at a time when that music was an oral tradition among farmers and shepherds rather than in archives. Instead of the picturesque nationalism of the late 19th century, he discovered something older, sharper, rhythmically asymmetrical, and melodically austere. He was able to reconcile Hungarian folk melody with the main currents of European music, and in doing so, created an entirely personal language. He became one of the major artists of the 20th century who created music both ancient and radically new.

Bartók was born in 1881 in Nagyszentmiklós (pronounced the way it's spelled!), then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, now in Romania. His early training, beginning at age five, was conventional: piano studies, exposure to Brahms, Liszt, and the Germanic tradition. Though no child prodigy, he showed great gifts as a young composer with short, folk-inspired dances and small piano pieces. He gave his first public performance at the age of 11 and continued studying music throughout his teenage years. In 1898, at age 17, Bartók entered the Budapest Academy of Music to study piano and composition, graduating in 1903. During his time there he was exposed to the nationalist movement that aimed to shake off the domination of German musical culture.

An oft-repeated vignette relates that in the summer of 1904 at a holiday resort Bartók overheard a young nanny from Transylvania sing folk songs to the children in her care. This sparked his lifelong dedication to folk music. His collection of Hungarian folksongs, in collaboration with his friend and fellow composer, Zoltán Kodály, laid the foundations of ethnomusicology as a modern discipline. Bartók and Kodály toured the remote villages of the country to gather native songs before they died out. Astonishingly, Bartók recorded more than 10,000 folk melodies in total. He commented, “In order really to feel the vitality of this music one must, so to speak, have lived it. And this is possible only when one comes to know it by direct contact with the peasants.” This was not antiquarian curiosity. Bartók recognized in these melodies a musical language that could renew art music from within, one that bypassed the exhausted harmonic conventions of late Romanticism.

He had also established himself as a renowned pianist rather than as a composer. In 1907 he was appointed professor of piano at the Academy, succeeding his own teacher, István Thoman. That same year, Bartók and Kodály founded a society for contemporary music. But public apathy defeated them, causing Bartók to give up composing for a time. He resumed his folklore studies and, during World War I, collected soldiers' songs.

After the fall of the Hapsburg monarchy in 1918 resulted in a surge of national fervour, Bartók became a leading musical figure in Hungary. He re-established his international reputation with concert tours across Europe, often playing with his second wife Ditta Pásztor. During the 1920s and '30s he composed many of his finest pieces and continued to teach. He resigned from the Budapest Academy of Music in 1934 to return to ethnomusicological research, expanding his studies to North Africa, Turkey, and Arabia.

Bartók's life intersected with some of the darkest events of the 20th century. A staunch opponent of fascism, he refused to perform in Nazi Germany and gradually withdrew from public life in Hungary as the political climate deteriorated. In 1940, Bartók reluctantly emigrated to the United States with his wife, settling in New York City and taking a teaching position at Columbia University. Their younger son, Péter, joined them in 1942; the older son remained in Hungary. Despite declining health and diminishing financial resources from too few concert engagements and commissions, Bartók continued to compose. His most important commission came from Serge Koussevitzky (conductor of the Boston Symphony Orchestra) for a *Concerto for Orchestra*. It remains Bartók's most famous and popular composition.

It is a myth that Bartók died in poverty. He had sufficient income from royalties, teaching, and performances, plus the help of friends and supporters. When ill health meant he could no longer appear in public, the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers, of which Bartók was not a member, provided funds for nursing home care. This allowed him to continue writing to the end. Final commissions came from William Primrose for a *Viola Concerto* and Yehudi Menuhin for a *Sonata for Solo Violin*. His last completed work was his *Piano Concerto No. 3*.

Béla Bartók died in New York City in 1945 at age 64, from complications of leukemia. He remarked to his doctor, "The trouble is that I have to go with so much still to say." Buried in New York, his funeral was attended by only ten people. In the late 1980s, the Hungarian government and Bartók's two sons arranged for re-interment in Budapest, next to his wife Ditta who died in 1982.

Although he became an American citizen shortly before his death, Bartók never felt fully at home in the United States. He was well-known as a pianist, ethnomusicologist and teacher, but not as a composer. Almost immediately after Bartók's death, there was a huge upsurge of interest in his music. As though compelled by a sense of guilt for their previous neglect of his works, conductors, performers, record companies, broadcasting stations, and even his publisher rushed to pay him the homage that might have brought him comfort in his last years.

A major figure in 20th-century music, Bartók achieved something rare; he created a language both intellectually rigorous and viscerally compelling. Bartók was not a revolutionary. He commented, "In art there are only fast or slow developments. Essentially it is a matter of evolution, not revolution." He adhered to Classical form, and to Beethoven's vision of music as an embodiment of human emotion. Learning about authentic Hungarian folk music freed him from what he called "the tyrannical rule of the major and minor keys" and brought him to new concepts of melody, harmony, and rhythm.

Bartók's music communicates. It may challenge, but it does not obscure. One can sense a mind organizing sound with clarity and purpose. For listeners, it helps to focus on rhythm first, colour and texture, repetition with variation, and the balance between energy and stillness. What may seem austere on first hearing often reveals warmth, humour, and even playfulness.

Bela Bartók and Franz Liszt are regarded as Hungary's greatest composers. Anthony Tommasini wrote, "[Bartók] has empowered generations of subsequent composers to incorporate folk music and classical traditions from whatever culture into their works. [He was] a formidable modernist who in the face of Schoenberg's breathtaking formulations showed another way, forging a language that was an amalgam of tonality, unorthodox scales and atonal wanderings."

Piano Concerto No. 3, Sz. 119 – Bartók (1945)

Orchestration: 2 flutes (2nd=piccolo), 2 oboes (2nd=English horn), 2 clarinets (2nd=bass clarinet), 2 bassoons, 4 horns, 2 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, snare drum, tam-tam, triangle, xylophone), strings, and solo piano

Although Béla Bartók's wrote his Third Piano Concerto at the end of his life the piece, remarkably enough, looks forward. Composed in a race against time, Bartók died with the work nearly completed. The final 17 bars were orchestrated by his student, Tibor Serly, who had the composer's shorthand to rely on. At the end of his final note, Bartók wrote a single Hungarian word, vége ("the end"). Bartók's earlier works often confront the listener with sharp angles and percussive force, but this Concerto is more transparent, accessible, and lyrical. It carries none of the bitterness one might expect from a composer in exile, ill, and financially strained. Timothy Judd calls it a "radiant musical farewell".

Written in 1945 in the United States during his last months, the Concerto was intended as a surprise birthday gift for his wife, the pianist Ditta Pásztor-Bartók. She was not a virtuoso in the Lisztian sense, so Bartók tailored the writing accordingly: still demanding, it is less formidable and aggressive, more gracious and idiomatic. He intended her performances of it to provide a source of income after his death. The work also marks the culmination of Bartók's ten-year investigation of tonality and simplification. However, after Béla's death, Ditta did not play the piano in public until the early 1960s. The premiere of the Concerto in 1946 was played instead by György Sándor, with Eugene Ormandy conducting the Philadelphia Orchestra. When Ditta did finally return to the concert stage, she played the Concerto.

The first movement—**Allegretto**—has a flexible sonata form with exposition, development, and recapitulation. It opens with a gently flowing folk theme introduced by the piano following a hushed murmur in the strings. The theme is original, but reminiscent of a 19th-century Hungarian dance called a *verbunkos* that was originally used for military recruitment. A second theme is presented. Then both are developed through variation, so that the return of the themes in the recapitulation feels natural.

The atmosphere is serene and pastoral. The melodic writing for the piano is quite ornate, enriched by hints of various modes or scales. Bartók called this complex pattern “polymodal chromaticism,” typical of his explorations in tonality and mathematical precision that characterize much of his work. For the most part, the piano presents a unified voice in both hands rather than independent rhythms. Underneath is clear orchestral texture. There are sparkling rapid passages and precise rhythm, but the tone is conversational. The movement does not so much end as evaporate, with quiet assurance rather than rhetorical flourish. Listen for how each line is audible and each colour distinct. As well, be conscious of how subtle harmonic shifts under seemingly simple melodies mask complexity.

The second movement—***Adagio religioso***—is among the most personal and highly emotional that Bartók ever wrote. The marking of *religioso* is unique in his output. It is an evocative and meditative nocturne in the style of a Beethoven chorale. The movement unfolds in three parts. The opening chorale, played by strings, evokes a sense of stillness and reverence hinted at by the *religioso* term. The music breathes slowly. Bartók is not typically associated with overt spirituality, but here he creates a sound world of quiet contemplation. The piano enters with a chorale strongly reminiscent of the third movement of Beethoven's *String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132*. Beethoven subtitled it as “Sacred song of thanksgiving to the deity from a convalescent” after he recovered from a near fatal illness. Perhaps this was wishful thinking by Bartók; sadly, he was not as fortunate as Beethoven.

The middle section is in Bartók’s “Night music” style: delicate piano figuration and woodwind calls imitate birdsong and evoke the pastoral sound of nature. Some sources say that they were inspired by sounds Bartók transcribed during a visit to North Carolina the previous year. The listener should think of this not as dramatic contrast but as a shift of perspective, from inward stillness to nocturnal observation. When the chorale returns, it feels transformed and enriched. The harmony is warmer and the pacing even more spacious.

Opera lovers may recognize harmonies throughout the movement based on the Tristan chord, a set of intervals Richard Wagner used in *Tristan und Isolde* to symbolize the “sad and yearning harmony of Romanticism.” Bartók presents it in the pentatonic mode, associated with ancient Hungarian folksong. Listen for the chorale’s harmonic purity with gentle dissonance, the piano’s bell-like articulation, the delicate interplay of winds in the central section, and a sense of time suspended.

The finale—***Allegro vivace***—reintroduces energy and a *joie de vivre* typical of other final movements in Bartók’s compositions. It is lively, rhythmic, and often playful, with a spirit that is closer to folk dance than to virtuoso display. Written in rondo-like form, the recurring main theme has an infectious short-long, long-short rhythm. The piano part is brilliant, filled with blazing virtuoso fireworks and Hungarian folk rhythms. Bartók’s characteristic asymmetries remain, but smoothed out so the listener feels motion without strain.

The central section is contrapuntal, almost Baroque, in style. The piano starts the fugue which then spreads throughout the orchestra. The fugue is punctuated by short riffs on 18th-century Classical style. The coda and the final bars orchestrated by Serly bring the Concerto to a joyful and life-affirming conclusion, reminiscent of how Bartók ended his beloved *Concerto for Orchestra*. It is

difficult to believe that the dance-like vitality and radiant conclusion were written by a composer on his deathbed. This writer suggests that it was, perhaps, an expression of love for his wife.

The premiere received a respectful rather than sensational reception, not the immediate acclaim accorded to the *Concerto for Orchestra*. But musicians quickly recognized the work's distinctive voice. Over time, it has become one of Bartók's most performed works, valued for its balance of accessibility and depth. It is a bridge between modernist language and broader audiences. Listen for simplicity that is never simple, for light that carries shadow within it, and for a voice speaking with extraordinary clarity.

Postscripts:

#1. Frank Zappa recorded part of the first movement of the Concerto in 1988 on his last tour, and included it in his album, *Make a Jazz Noise Here*. He said, "I think it is one of the most beautiful melodies ever written."

#2. In the 1990s, the composer's son, Peter Bartók, revised past editions of the Concerto to fix several printed errors that his father identified but never corrected. The revised edition was first played in 1994 with Andrey Kasparov as soloist and the Columbus Indiana Philharmonic.

#3. This Concerto is catalogued as Sz. 119, not with an Op. number. Bartók, confusingly, assigned opus numbers to his works three times. After his death, three additional attempts were made to catalogue his work; the most widely used is András Szöllősy's chronological Sz. numbers, from 1 to 121.

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (1891 to 1953)

Note: The following biography first appeared in 2024-25.

Before World War I, when Rachmaninoff and Scriabin were at the “top of the charts” in Russian music, a young student enrolled in the Saint Petersburg Conservatory. Descriptors of the teenage Sergei Prokofiev included arrogant, rebellious, stubborn, ill-tempered, surly, and eccentric. But he was undeniably talented and unique.

Born in rural Ukraine, Prokofiev was a precocious child. Hearing his mother practise Chopin and Beethoven inspired him to learn the piano. He composed his first piano piece by age five and an opera before he was 10. Opera remained the genre Prokofiev was most fond of working in, but not what he became best-known for. In another sign of genius, he met and played two world chess champions at age fourteen, beating one of them. Chess remained a passion throughout his life.

Prokofiev graduated from the Saint Petersburg Conservatory and won the Rubenstein Prize for playing his own *Piano Concerto #1*, instead of the prescribed Classical one. As part of the local music scene, Prokofiev developed a reputation as an *enfant terrible* and musical rebel. His highly dissonant and virtuosic piano compositions garnered praise. But there were critics. According to one account, after he played the premiere of his *Piano Concerto #2*, the audience exclaimed, “To hell with this futuristic music! The cats on the roof make better music!”. But the modernists loved it. Prokofiev insisted that the piano was a percussion instrument and must be played that way, with propulsive rhythms and stark, for that time, dissonances.

By 1915, Prokofiev was ready to venture into the orchestral world with ballets commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev (who had done the same thing to launch Igor Stravinsky,) as well as operas. One of the ballets, *Chout (The Buffoon)*, was called by Stravinsky “the single piece of modern music he could listen to with pleasure”, while Maurice Ravel called it “a work of genius”.

After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Prokofiev received approval to leave the country and tour the United States as a pianist. Critics said he had “steel” in his fingers. Following his recital debut in Manhattan, *The New York Times* reviewer, floored by Prokofiev’s dissonances and rhythms, wrote, “He is a psychologist of the uglier emotions: hate, contempt, rage—above all, rage—disgust, despair, mockery and defiance... Occasionally, there are moments of tenderness, exquisite jewels that briefly sparkle and then melt into seething undertow.”

In the 1920s, Prokofiev also lived in Paris and then Germany. In Paris, he finished his most successful opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*, written for the Chicago Opera, and his *Piano Concerto No. 3*. His fortunes in the U.S. and Western Europe were greatly diminished in the early 1930s by the Great Depression. He thought of himself as a composer first and touring pianist second. In 1936 he returned to composing in the Soviet Union where he had tremendous successes with *Lieutenant Kijé*, *Peter and the Wolf*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella*, *Alexander Nevsky* (scored for the Eisenstein film), the *Fifth* and *Sixth Symphonies*, and the *Piano Sonatas Nos. 6–8*. During World War II, Soviet edicts for how composers must write were loosened, allowing Prokofiev more musical freedom. This is when he wrote his most ambitious work, an operatic version of *War and Peace*.

In 1948, the Zhdanov Doctrine denounced six artists, including Dmitri Shostakovich, Prokofiev, and Aram Khachaturian, for the crime of “formalism”. This is described as a “renunciation of the basic principles of classical music” in favour of “muddled, nerve-racking” sounds that “turned music into cacophony”. Eight of Prokofiev’s works were banned from performance. Fear prevented the performance of other works and operas. This put Prokofiev into severe financial straits. His health declined and he withdrew from public life. But a new generation of Soviet performers, notably pianist Sviatoslav Richter and cellist Mstislav Rostropovich, rallied to his support and offered him their friendship. Prokofiev composed landmark cello works for Rostropovich.

The premiere of his *Symphony No. 7* was the last public performance he attended. Prokofiev died at age 61 on March 5, 1953, the same day Joseph Stalin’s death was announced. He had lived near Red Square and for three days throngs gathered to mourn Stalin, making it impossible to hold Prokofiev’s funeral service at the headquarters of the Soviet Composers' Union. His coffin had to be moved by hand through back streets. Shostakovich was one of about 30 people who attended the funeral. He had written to Prokofiev, “I wish you at least another hundred years to live and create. Listening to such works as your *Seventh Symphony* makes it much easier and more joyful to live.”

Prokofiev explained his view of the future of music, “I could not approve of adopting the idiom of another man and calling it one’s own... I think the desire which I and many of my fellow composers feel, to attain a more simple and melodic expression is the inevitable direction of music of the future.” Arthur Honegger said that Prokofiev would “remain for us the greatest figure of contemporary music.” He created masterpieces in many genres. His music was revolutionary for its time and has outlived most music of that era.

The Love for Three Oranges Suite, Op. 33a – Prokofiev (1919–20)

Orchestration: *piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 3 bassoons (3rd = contrabassoon), 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, cymbals, gong, orchestra bells, snare drum, suspended cymbals, tambourine, triangle, xylophone), 2 harps, and strings*

The Love for Three Oranges originated as an opera, Prokofiev’s first for an American stage. He wrote the libretto while crossing from Japan to San Francisco, part of his four-month journey from Vladivostok to New York as the Russian Revolution was ending. The opera premiered in Chicago in 1921 with the composer conducting. Its source is an 18th-century Italian *commedia dell’arte* tale by Carlo Gozzi, a parody of fairy-tale conventions. Prokofiev loved satire and here he sharpened the absurdity: kings who cannot laugh, princes who fall in love with fruit, and magicians who bicker like vaudeville rivals. Even before the curtain rises, a prologue presents competing factions—Tragedians, Comedians, Romantics, Ridiculers—arguing over what kind of play this should be. The answer, of course, is all of them, and none.

The story is a silly one. It tells of a young, melancholy prince who is cursed by the old witch Fata Morgana to travel to distant lands in search of three large oranges (yes, citrus fruit!), each containing a beautiful princess. The first two die as soon as they emerge from the oranges, but the

third and most beautiful survives her exposure to the elements. The prince and princess fall in love and marry, and Fata Morgana flies to the nether regions.

The orchestral suite, written in 1924, distills this theatrical mischief not into a synopsis but into a sequence of sharply etched scenes. Each is self-sufficient and reveals a different facet of Prokofiev's style at its most theatrical: biting, elegant, rhythmically exact, and always slightly amused. Prokofiev composed the opera while living in the United States, at a time when his reputation as a modernist *enfant terrible* preceded him. Yet *The Love for Three Oranges* is not forbidding music. It is witty, lucid, and direct—qualities that would become increasingly important in his later career. The Suite, assembled soon after the opera, helped the work travel beyond the stage. It remains the most frequently heard incarnation of the piece.

There are six movements, each drawn from key moments in the opera. Prokofiev's ordering creates a satisfying dramatic arc: from theatrical introduction through grotesque humour, lyric interlude, and finally escape.

I. The Ridicules (March): The opening is both ceremonial and subversive. It is a slightly crooked march with accents falling unexpectedly and phrases ending prematurely. In the opera, the "Ridicules" are one of the factions arguing about the nature of the drama. Here, their presence is unmistakable as the music parades with mock dignity. Listen for the deliberately stiff and overly proper rhythm, sudden harmonic turns that undercut the pomp, and wind interjections making comments on the proceedings.

II. The Magician Tchélió and Fata Morgana Play Cards: The tone shifts as the orchestra plays short, pointed figures passing rapidly between instruments. Think of this as a musical chess game where each gesture is answered, deflected, or contradicted. The scene depicts a contest between opposing magical forces. Prokofiev paints this as sly manoeuvring rather than grand conflict. The effect is to produce tension but not overt drama. Listen for the quick exchange of motifs between winds and strings, the instability created by chromatic harmonies, and the unpredictable rhythms where phrases seem to hesitate and then lurch forward.

III. March: The most famous movement of the suite is one of Prokofiev's most recognizable creations. Less than a minute and a half in duration, this march takes itself seriously just long enough for the listener to notice that it should not. The melody is square, emphatic, and irresistibly memorable. Yet its orchestration—bright brass, crisp percussion, and slightly exaggerated phrasing—introduces a hint of caricature. Listen for the bold melody, the precision in the brass and winds, and subtle shifts in harmony that keep the repetition alive. It is easy to hear this movement as pure entertainment, but it has exacting craftsmanship. Listeners of a certain age will recognize the theme as the opening of NBC's *Dragnet* from the 1950s and '60s.

IV. Scherzo: There is a lot of scurrying around here as strings dart in rapid figures, and winds flicker in quick responses. The music has a sense of perpetual motion. Prokofiev's orchestration is especially deft, even at high speed. Listen for the light string articulation, the interplay between the upper winds and violins, and the absence of heavy bass. The result is music that hovers.

V. The Prince and the Princess: At the heart of the Suite is a moment of unexpected lyricism. The wit of earlier movements is followed by a melody of genuine warmth. The orchestra softens, lines

lengthen, and harmony settles. But even here, the sentiment is carefully measured as the melody unfolds gracefully. This movement shows that Prokofiev's emotional range extends well beyond satire. Listen for the broad sustained string line, gentle woodwind colours, and the balance between expression and structure.

VI. The Flight: The Suite ends with brilliantly orchestrated “escape” music in rapid motion and energy. Prokofiev builds momentum through rhythm. Even at high speed, the orchestra remains clear. The ending is decisive, and the music vanishes as quickly as it arrived. Listen for the driving pulse in lower strings, quick exchanges between sections of the orchestra, and the tightening of rhythmic patterns near the end.

The Love for Three Oranges Suite surprises and delights. It demonstrates Prokofiev's ability to compress theatrical experience into purely orchestral terms; each movement is a precisely portrayed character study. It does not need large symphonic statements to communicate. Seriousness and humour are not opposites; they coexist. Prokofiev understands that the quickest way to the ear is often through a smile.

Romeo and Juliet Suite No. 2, Op. 64b – Prokofiev (1936)

Orchestration: piccolo, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, bells, cymbals, maracas, snare drum, tambourine, triangle, xylophone), harp, celesta, piano, and strings

Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* ballet, the seventh of the nine he composed, is a treasured classic and one of the 20th-century's great reinventions of Shakespeare. It is orchestral theatre rather than spoken drama. Yet its path to the stage was anything but smooth. Completed in 1935 after Prokofiev's return to the Soviet Union, the ballet was initially rejected by Soviet theatres as “undanceable,” its rhythms too complex, its dramatic pacing too unconventional. Even more controversial was Prokofiev's original plan for a “happy ending,” in which the lovers survive. He explained, “The reason for taking such barbarous liberty with Shakespeare's play was purely choreographic—live people can dance, but the dying can hardly be expected to dance in bed...” Fortunately, after a furious uproar he quickly abandoned the idea and stuck to writing music, not words.

Denied immediate staging, Prokofiev did something both practical and inspired: he extracted orchestral suites from the ballet, allowing the music to circulate independently. *Suite No. 1* (Op. 64b) appeared first in 1936; *Suite No. 2* followed soon after, offering a different selection of numbers. The complete ballet finally reached the stage in 1938 in Brno, Czechia, and in Russia in 1940. Prokofiev later revised the score, and a 1946 performance by the Bolshoi received great acclaim. Orrin Howard comments, “With impressive economy of means, without ever resorting to inflated emotionalism, Prokofiev conjured in sound every circumstance, character, and mood. The musical pictorialism is endlessly intriguing; the musical footprints are clearly recognizable.”

The Suites are not mere highlights. They are re-compositions that function as symphonic narratives. *Suite No. 2* emphasizes lyricism, atmosphere, and psychological nuance alongside the ballet's

more famous dramatic moments. Comprising seven movements, the sequence traces an emotional arc rather than a strict chronology: public conflict, private innocence, spiritual reflection, social ritual, intimate tragedy, exotic colour, and final catastrophe.

I. Montagues and Capulets: Perhaps the most famous movement from the entire ballet, this “Dance of the Knights” establishes the atmosphere of power, rigidity, and social division. The dissonance of the opening hints at the eventual tragedy. Heavy brass and low strings lay out a stern, processional rhythm. The theme in the strings and the countertheme in the horns depict the arrogant feuding families. A contrasting middle section featuring the harp, flutes, and violas presents a more lyrical theme often associated with Juliet. The saxophone leads a return to the first melody as the feuding resumes. The harmonic language is stark, built on blocks of sound rather than flowing progression. This movement is not merely a dance but a statement of social order.

II. Juliet the Young Girl: A complete contrast, the light, quick, and playful theme is cleverly divided between the high strings and winds, creating a portrait of youthful energy. The music shifts rapidly between moods, capturing Juliet’s innocence before tragedy encroaches. Emerging maturity is hinted at by melodies from the clarinet and the flute. Prokofiev’s genius is heard in the precise orchestration that still evokes a sense of freedom and spontaneity.

III. Friar Laurence: The texture darkens. Two themes portray the cleric, one by the bassoons, tuba and harp, the other by the cellos. They create a solemn, almost archaic atmosphere. The harmony suggests contemplation. Listen for slow-moving harmonic progressions that provide a sense of stillness in contrast to the previous and following movements.

IV. Dance: This courtly dance was part of the opening scene of the second act. The piano’s prominent role, along with the harp and pizzicato strings, introduces rhythmic energy. The dance feels slightly stiff. The main melody is played by the oboe and then the flute. Violins then provide a melody of their own. The formal elegance of the phrasing and the very spare orchestral colour carry a hint of unease.

V. Romeo and Juliet Before Parting: This section is one of the ballet’s most extended and emotionally charged scenes. The lovers’ farewell is expressed through long, arching melodic lines, supported by gradually intensifying orchestration. The music builds in waves, but the climaxes remain somewhat fragile. This is genuinely Romantic in style but with Prokofiev’s trademark structural clarity. Listen for hints throughout of the impending tragedy.

VI. Dance of the Antilles Girls: This short dance is a brief bit of theatrical relief from the main action and provides an unexpected moment of colour and contrast. Light percussion, violin and wind solos create a sense of exoticism.

VII. Romeo at Juliet’s Grave: The suite closes with one of Prokofiev’s most powerful and poignantly tragic statements. Low strings and brass establish a dark, sustained atmosphere. The music unfolds slowly and inexorably, culminating in a climactic outburst before subsiding into stillness and quiet resolution. The ending is a remarkable expression of the tragedy: the contrabassoon representing the tomb, the soft strings above, a high note from the piccolo and a sorrowful sob from the cellos and bass clarinet.

Postscript: Comparison of Three Suites.

Suite No. 2 reveals Prokofiev's extraordinary ability to translate drama into purely orchestral terms. Without dancers or staging, the characters remain vivid, the emotions immediate. Suite No. 1 is more overtly theatrical and presents the drama. Suite No. 2 has more emphasis on emotion and interior life. Prokofiev composed Suite No. 3, Op. 101 about a decade after the first two, at a time when he had full perspective on the work's success. The first two were created out of necessity, the third was to provide new material for concert programs without repeating selections. Suite No. 3 is often overlooked because it lacks the blockbuster familiarity of the earlier suites. It shows Prokofiev not as dramatist, but as a musical poet. The first two suites present *Romeo and Juliet* as drama, while Suite No. 3 presents it as memory.

Prokofiev also wrote solo piano reductions of some selections and published them as *Romeo and Juliet: Ten Pieces for Piano*, Op. 75.