

## SERGEY PROKOFIEV'S BALLETS IN LATVIA

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### Summary

The Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) started his ballet composer's career in collaboration with the great Russian manager Sergei Diaghileff in ballet company *Ballet Russes*. Among the best known ballets of the period are *The Steel Step* (1925) and *The Prodigal Son* (1928). In the thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Prokofiev returned to Soviet Russia, and the soviet theaters commissioned several ballets to him, among them *Romeo and Juliet* after William Shakespeare (1935) and *Cinderella* after Charles Perrault (1943).

The first Prokofiev's ballet, staged in Latvian National opera, was *Rebus* (*Le Pas d'acier*) in 1933. The ballet master of the piece was Anatoly Vilzak (1896–1998), the previous ballet dancer of Mariinsky Ballet, *Diaghileff Ballet Russes* and several other ballet companies. *Rebus* was the first truly modern ballet on the stage of Latvian National Opera. Choreography and scenery as well as sets were done in modern style and expressed both the dynamic score and idea of the ballet. Vilzak himself performed the major male role in the performance. However, *Rebus* had no success, and was not accepted by the audience.

Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo and Juliet* has been staged three times on the stage of Latvian National Opera. The first performance was staged in 1953 by ballet master Jevgeņijs Čanga (1920–1999) and it was done in the traditions of the drama ballet genre that was very popular in the Soviet Union during the thirties and forties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Prima ballerina Anna Priede danced Juliet and her lyrical style of dance was very similar to that of Galina Ulanova whose Juliet had become an icon in the Soviet Union. Čanga's performance was brilliant in its monolithic way of Prokofiev's score and because of the pure style of Renaissance, done by set designer Edgars Vārdaunis and costume designer Marga Spertāle.

Chief ballet master Aleksandrs Lembergs (1921–1985) of Opera staged his *Romeo and Juliet* in 1982. This ballet production was quite laconic and it was staged in neoclassical choreography. Later it was said that *Romeo and Juliet* was the purest in style of all ballets by Lembergs.

The third *Romeo and Juliet* was staged by guest-star, Russian ballet dancer and ballet master Vladimir Vasilyev (b. 1940) in 1999. The choreography of the performance also was done in neoclassical style and the most significant nuance of the performance was the use of the orchestra. The orchestra was placed on the back part of the stage with the aim to bring closer music to the action of the ballet.

Prokofiev's *Cinderella* was also staged three times in Latvian National Opera. The first staging was done by Jevgeņijs Čanga in 1953. The staging became indicative due to beautiful sets and scenery by Čanga's best co-workers Vārdaunis and Spertāle. Although Čanga's *Cinderella* was staged

much in the traditions of drama ballet and was rather short of dance, the performance has remained in the history of Latvian ballet as a successful example of fairy-tale ballet.

Next time *Cinderella* was staged after 38 years (1991) and the author of the choreography was guest choreographer René Pegliasco. He tried not only to renovate the fairy-tale on the stage but also to use more prosaic ideas pertaining to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The conception to combine such ideas with *Cinderella's* libretto proved to be wrong and Pegliasko's *Cinderella* had no much success with the audience.

The third staging of *Cinderella* (2005) was linked with the loudest scandal in the history of Latvian ballet. The guest ballet master Radu Poklitaru (b. 1972) staged *Cinderella* in a controversially interpreted surrounding – in the *house of ill fame*. The idea of the *red lights* surrounding, Stepmother as the owner of the house and her daughters as the prostitutes, as well as the homosexual Prince's Teacher in the role of the Good Fairy was very popular among young people, and Poklitaru ballet was a very big success. Owing to the problems with Sergei Prokofiev copyright heirs after few performances Poklitaru's *Cinderella* was withdrawn from the repertoire.

Prokofiev's *The Prodigal Son* also witnessed only a few performances in the Opera. It was staged by Estonian guest choreographer Mai Murdmaa (b. 1938) and was especially done for ballet dancer Gennady Gorbaniev's creative ballet night in 1978. The Murdmaa's version of *The Prodigal Son* was ascetic and very controversial.

Sergey Prokofiev's ballets have quite regularly been staged in Latvian National Opera, and the relevant productions have been different in style and conception. The humane idea comprised both in the score and libretto of his ballets, especially in *Romeo and Juliet*, has always been preserved in the tradition of Latvian ballet.

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