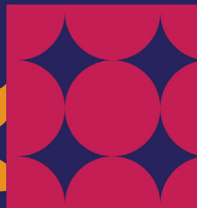


# ROMEO AND JULIET



The activity addresses PA Academic Standards 9.3.12 A, D, E, I & J, 9.3.12 G, 9.4.12A, 9.4.12 D and National Core Arts Standards MU:Re7.2.8b, MU:Pr42.8c, MU:Re8.1.6a

## Revisionist Mystery

### Historical Analysis

The story of *Romeo and Juliet* dates back as early as 1476, when Italian writer Masuccio Salernitano penned a tragic tale about two star-crossed lovers. Over the years, the storyline morphed slightly with each retelling, with at least five documented versions by the time it reached William Shakespeare's hands in England. Consistent across each version was the tragic end of the two main characters: a sleeping potion creates a fatal misunderstanding, leading to the deaths of both Romeo and Juliet.

Why then, nearly 500 years later, would composer Sergei Prokofiev change the story's ending to have Romeo and Juliet survive? Was it his idea? Did he feel pressure to do so? Scholars have identified several possible explanations, but nobody knows for sure.

In this activity, students become the scholars investigating why Prokofiev created his original version of *Romeo & Juliet* in 1935 (before later reverting to the well-known tragic ending in 1940... yet another question).

1. Divide students into three teams
2. Assign each team a historical theory to investigate



**Team A:** Practical necessity



**Team B:** Religious beliefs



**Team C:** Soviet society



3. Each team researches their theory and prepares an argument
4. Each team argues their case to the larger group
5. After all teams have made their case, vote on which argument was the most convincing. What made it more persuasive than the others?

## OVERVIEW: SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Katie Schouten, PSO Director of Learning & Engagement



Born in 1891 in Sontsovka, Ukraine (then part of the Russian Empire), Sergei Prokofiev was a musical wiz from an early age. He grew up in a comfortable home, studied piano, wrote his first opera, *The Giant*, at the age of 9 (which he performed for his family), and made his performance debut in St. Petersburg at the age of 17.

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, when Tsar Nicholas II and the Romanov dynasty were violently overthrown, Prokofiev left his homeland. He spent the next 18 years abroad, first in the United States, and then in Europe, settling down in Paris with his wife Lina.

Meanwhile the Soviet government created an art system in which select composers and other artists received financial support, material privileges, and access to the supplies and skills needed to make their creative vision reality — so long as that vision upheld the government's ideals of Socialist Realism.

As Soviet leader Joseph Stalin amassed ever-greater power, the government worked to bring home as many Russian artists working abroad as possible. Prokofiev's international successes created a fervor among Soviet officials to have him return. After a series of visits, Prokofiev ultimately acceded to the Soviet government's wooing (promises of abundant work and resources) and its ultimatum (Prokofiev and his family could only enter the country if they moved back permanently; they would not be allowed to visit) and relocated to the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s. The commission Prokofiev received to compose *Romeo and Juliet* was among the deciding factors that brought him home.



Prokofiev composed most of *Romeo and Juliet* in the summer of 1935 at Polenovo, the Bolshoi Theater Collective's tranquil country estate located along the Oka River, south of Moscow. He devised the ballet in four acts, working in collaboration with Adrian Piotrovsky (dramatist), Sergei Radlov (director), and Rostislav Zakharov (choreographer). The team created extremely detailed drafts noting the timing of

each dance number and the emotional character of each musical movement. In the fourth and final act, Friar Laurence intercepts Romeo just as he is about to stab himself. Juliet awakes in Romeo's arms.

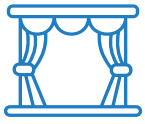
The 1935 composition, however, met with resistance. It eventually received a partial premiere in 1938, in Czechoslovakia. The full premiere did not occur for another 70 years, when in 2008 the Mark Morris Dance Group staged the original 1935 production – complete with its “happy ending” – by working closely with musicologist Simon Morrison and original records from the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art.

## Recommended Resources for All Teams

- Joshua Barone, “[The Tortured History Behind Prokofiev’s Romeo and Juliet](#),” *The New York Times*, January 23, 2018.
- Patricia Cohen, “[But Soft! Less Woe for Juliet and Her Romeo](#),” *The New York Times*, November 18, 2007.
- Mark Morris Dance Group, “[Romeo & Juliet, On Motifs of Shakespeare](#),” July 4, 2008.
- Sergei Prokofiev, “[Synopsis: Romeo and Juliet](#),” 1935.
- Sergei Prokofiev & Greg Spears, “[Original Manuscript: Romeo and Juliet](#),” 1935.

## Resources to Dig Deeper

- Simon Morrison, [The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years](#), 2009.
- Merrell Noden, “[Unmasking Prokofiev](#),” *Princeton Alumni Weekly*, June 8, 2018.
- Boris Schwarz, “6. [The Resolution of 1932](#)” in *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, 1983.
- Boris Schwarz, “[7. Opera, Ballet, and Orchestral Music, 1930’s](#)” in *Music and Musical Life in Soviet Russia*, 1983.
- Deborah Annette Wilson, “[Prokofiev’s Romeo and Juliet: History of a Compromise](#),” PhD Dissertation, 2003.



## TEAM A: PRACTICAL NECESSITY

Sergei Prokofiev explained the choice of ending for *Romeo and Juliet* simply: "Living people can dance, the dying cannot." Yet one of the chief criticisms of his original 1935 composition was that the music was "undanceable."

Prepare an argument defending Prokofiev's stated reason for *Romeo and Juliet* surviving in the original 1935 composition.

### Consider:

- What constraints do staging and choreography impose on storytelling?
- How does the lack of text/speaking in a ballet impact a composer's choices?
- What do we know about the intended choreography for the original composition?



### Recommended Resources to Get Started

- Michael Clive, "[About Prokofiev's Romeo & Juliet](#)," Pacific Symphony, January 26, 2023.
- Nona Monahin, "[Prokofiev's Romeo and Juliet: Some Consequences of the 'Happy Ending,'](#)" *Borrowers and Lenders*, May 4, 2023.
- Lyndsey Winship, "[Don't Worry, Just Watch: How Do You Tell a Story Through Dance?](#)" *The Guardian*, October 6, 2022.



## TEAM B: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

While living in Paris in the 1920s, Sergei Prokofiev became familiar with Christian Science. He wrote repeatedly in his journals and letters about his study of these beliefs and the benefits he found in them.

Prepare an argument explaining how Prokofiev's religious beliefs led to the decision to have Romeo and Juliet survive in the original 1935 composition.

### Consider:

- What do Christian Scientists believe?
- How does the ending of Romeo & Juliet as told by Shakespeare align with the beliefs of a Christian Scientist?
- What might a Christian Scientist think of Romeo and Juliet's choice to put aside their families' feud?



*Christian Science Sentinel emblem*

### Recommended Resources to Get Started

- Melissa-Jo Owen, "[Christian Science](#)," EBSCO Research Starter, 2022.
- "[From the Collections: Sergei Prokofiev and Christian Science](#)," Mary Baker Eddy Library, October 1, 2024.
- Peter Hodgson, "[For the Glory of God: How Christian Science Impacted the Life of Composer Sergei Prokofiev](#)," *Christian Science Sentinel*, October 9, 2006.

Prokofiev arrived in the Soviet Union just as it began mandating “Socialist Realism” in all art forms, including music. The goal of this requirement was to ensure that all artworks – be they literature, painting, music, or theater – uphold the Soviet party line and be understandable to the proletariat working class.

Prepare an argument explaining how Soviet society, especially the mandate of Socialist Realism, led to the decision to have Romeo and Juliet survive in Prokofiev’s original 1935 composition.

### Consider:

- What is Socialist Realism? How was it enforced?
- What would the tenets of Socialist Realism look like in music? In ballet?
- How might the changing political landscape have affected Prokofiev as a newly relocated composer?



### Recommended Resources to Get Started

- Michael Clive, “[About Prokofiev’s Romeo & Juliet,](#)” Pacific Symphony, January 26, 2023.
- Simon Morrison, “[1. Plans Gone Awry](#)” in *The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years*, 2009.
- Glenn L. Swygart, “[Stalin Restricts Soviet Composers,](#)” EBSCO Research Starter, 2021.