

SYNOPSIS OF THE ORIGINAL BALLET

INTRODUCTION BY SIMON MORRISON

Prokofiev wrote a detailed, number-by-number scenario of the ballet, dated May 16, 1935, in consultation with Adrian Piotrovsky and Sergey Radlov. It was subsequently vetted by Soviet cultural officials, including Sergey Dinamov and Vladimir Mutnykh, and revised. The original, handwritten document (with the Act IV happy ending) and two typed revisions (without) are found in the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art in Moscow. This synopsis derives from the May 16, 1935 original.

Act I

Scene 1: Early morning on a street in Verona. Romeo passes by, pensive, and ignores the maidens seeking his attentions. The mood is tense. After an orange is thrown through a window, servants of the rival Capulet and Montague families begin to fight. The alarm sounds as the violence escalates into a brawl. It is quelled when the Prince of Verona threatens death to those involved in future disturbances.

Scene 2: Servants prepare for a ball at the House of the Capulets. Juliet, just fourteen years old, enters with her nursemaid, who struggles to get her into her gown. The guests arrive, among them the uninvited Romeo, Benvolio, and Mercutio in masks. During a ponderous dance for the knights, Juliet dances with Paris, her intended suitor; she treats him politely and indifferently. Romeo catches sight of her and falls instantly in love, forgetting his unrequited relationship with Rosalind. His closest friend Mercutio enlivens the gathering with a buffoonish dance, after which Romeo and Juliet perform a madrigal. Juliet disentangles herself from Romeo and playfully dashes from the room. Tybalt, meantime, recognizes Romeo as a member of the rival Montagues. Tempers flare. The Capulets escort Tybalt out the door as the guests disperse. Juliet returns to the empty, half-darkened hall, looking for a kerchief that she dropped during her encounter with Romeo. She blushes when Romeo emerges from behind a curtain. They perform an amorous pas de deux, after which the nursemaid appears and advises Romeo to leave.

Act II

Scene 1: The public square fills with revelers celebrating the carnival season. Cheerful and animated, Romeo strolls through, preoccupied with thoughts of Juliet. Mercutio teases him while a street dance and procession begin. The nursemaid seeks out Romeo at Juliet's behest and, after exchanging humorous bows with Mercutio, gives Romeo her ring; the couple is secretly betrothed. Euphoric, Romeo dashes out amid the continuing festivities

Scene 2: Friar Laurence performs the wedding ceremony in his chamber.

Scene 3: Mercutio and Benvolio enter with their companions. The surrounding street dance suddenly halts when Tybalt bumps up against Mercutio. The two stare at each other like bulls. Romeo, fresh from Friar Laurence's, tries in vain to restore calm. When Mercutio impulsively confronts Tybalt, a duel ensues, ending in the hapless Mercutio's death. Romeo resolves to exact revenge and battles fiercely with Tybalt until the latter is slain. Recalling the Prince of Verona's edict, Benvolio wraps Romeo in a cloak and urges him to flee.

Act III

Scene 1: The scene shifts from the public to the private sphere. Romeo, about to escape Verona for Mantua, bids farewell to Juliet in the predawn haze of her bedchamber. Upon his departure, the nursemaid warns Juliet that her parents have come to see her with Paris, her presumed suitor. Juliet weeps, then grows hysterical as her father orders her to marry.

Scene 2: Juliet turns for help to Friar Laurence, who suggests she feign her death with a sleeping potion. Once everyone believes her dead, Romeo can spirit her away to Mantua where the two may live in peace.

Scene 3: Juliet disingenuously informs her parents she will marry Paris the next day. With wedding preparations underway, she takes the potion and falls fast asleep in her bedchamber. Paris presents a gift-bearing retinue, with which he intends to greet Juliet before dawn. The gifts include an emerald, carpets, and exotic contraband goods. Juliet's mother and nursemaid attempt to rouse her. When she does not wake, they conclude that she has died.

Act IV

Having returned from Mantua to reclaim Juliet, Romeo enters her bedchamber, dispatches the servant, and gazes forlornly down at her. He too thinks that she has died and prepares to stab himself. Friar Laurence enters the room and tries to stop him; the two struggle for control of the knife. The ruse is revealed as the sleeping potion wears off and Juliet begins to breathe. Friar Laurence joyfully sounds the alarm for the townspeople to gather. Romeo first moves to embrace him, then approaches Juliet, carrying her away from the crowd into a space all their own. Friar Laurence directs the attention of the townspeople to the departing lovers. They are now alone. Juliet slowly comes to herself in Romeo's arms; everything in their movement reflects their emotions.