

Love for Three Oranges, The [*Lyubov' k tryom apel'sinam; L'amour des trois oranges*].

Opera in a prologue and four acts, op.33, by [sergey Prokofiev](#) to his own libretto after [carlo Gozzi](#)'s *fiaba L'amore delle tre melarance* (1761), adapted (1913) by Vsevolod Meyerhold, Vladimir Solov'yov and Konstantin Vogak; Chicago, Auditorium, 30 December 1921 (as *L'amour des trois oranges*, French translation by the composer and Vera Janacopoulos).

Prokofiev's second completed opera (juvenilia apart) and the first to achieve performance, *The Love for Three Oranges*, was written in New York, where the composer had settled after emigrating from Russia in the wake of the revolution. Immediately before his departure, in spring 1918, Vsevolod Meyerhold, the great director, made Prokofiev a gift of the first issue of his journal *The Love for Three Oranges*, containing a Russian adaptation (by Meyerhold with two collaborators) of the eponymous theatrical tale by the Venetian nobleman and satirist Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806). Gozzi had cast the work in the form of a *commedia dell'arte* scenario, seeing in the slapstick comedy of masks an antidote to the heavy melodrama and the petty naturalism that were (he thought) degrading the contemporary theatre. A century and a half later Meyerhold felt the same way. He expressed the hope that Prokofiev would derive a prose libretto from the scenario and set it in the fleet, flexible and resolutely 'anti-operatic' manner of his earlier opera, *The Gambler*, which Meyerhold had hoped to produce in the last pre-revolutionary Petrograd season. By the time Prokofiev docked in San Francisco he had a draft libretto in hand.

The King of Clubs <i>king of an imaginary kingdom where everyone dresses as a playing-card</i>	bass
The Prince <i>his son</i>	tenor
Princess Clarice <i>the king's niece</i>	contralto
Leander <i>prime minister, costumed as the King of Spades</i>	baritone
Truffaldino <i>jester</i>	tenor
Pantalone <i>courtier, the king's confidant</i>	baritone
Celio <i>sorcerer, the king's protector</i>	bass
Fata Morgana <i>witch, Leander's protector</i>	soprano
Linetta <i>princess in an orange</i>	contralto
Nicoletta <i>princess in an orange</i>	mezzo-soprano
Ninetta <i>princess in an orange</i>	soprano
Cook	hoarse bass
Farfarello <i>a devil</i>	bass
Smeraldina <i>a black slave girl</i>	mezzo-soprano
Master of Ceremonies	tenor
Herald	bass
Trumpeteer	bass trombone
Ten Cranks (five tenors, five basses), Tragedians (basses), Comedians (tenors), Lyricists (sopranos, tenors), Empty Heads (altos, basses), imps (basses), doctors (tenors, baritones), courtiers (full chorus)	
Silent roles: monsters, drunks, gluttons, watchmen, servants, four soldiers	

Setting The world of make-believe, once upon a time

Gozzi had derived his *fiaba*, a ludicrous parody of the standard quest motif, by conflating two stories in Giambattista Basile's *Pentamerone*, subtitled *Lo cunto de li cunti* ('The Tale of Tales'), the earliest (1634) printed collection of European folk and fairy-tales. Having launched a pamphlet war on both the reigning dramatists of the mid-18th-century Venetian stage – Carlo Goldoni, the paragon of bourgeois realism, and Pietro Chiari, a specialist in high flown melodrama – Gozzi was challenged by Goldoni to do better. He boasted that he could ruin his antagonists by dramatizing the most ridiculous story in the world in the very manner Goldoni and Chiari most despised. As enacted by the celebrated troupe of Antonio Sacchi during the Venetian carnival of 1761, *L'amore delle tre melarance* redeemed its author's boast: Goldoni beat a retreat the next year to Paris.

Owing to the conventions of the *commedia dell'arte*, Gozzi made room in his adaptation for a large number of traditional masks: Tartaglia (the Prince), Pantalone, Smeraldina, Brighella (a character dropped by Prokofiev) and above all Truffaldino, a species of Arlecchino, the mask worn by Sacchi himself. The folksy Celio and the bombastic Fata Morgana were stand-ins for Goldoni and Chiari respectively. Their parts, written out in full, consisted of parodies of their literary prototypes. Erudite burlesque reached its height in a little set piece in Act 2, entitled the 'quarrel trio' (*contrasto in terzo*), in which three characters fall into a dispute about dramatic values. Clarice declare her preference for 'tragic performances, in which you find characters hurling themselves from windows or turrets'; Leandro plumps for comedies of manners; Brighella pleads for 'the improvised comedy of masks, an innocent popular diversion'.

This little quarrel trio grew in Meyerhold's adaptation to become, both temporally and spatially, the frame of the entire play. The spatial frame was to consist of twin turrets on opposite sides of the stage, housing a collection of clowns representing aesthetes of various antagonistic persuasions. The action was to begin with a parade, in which the actors portraying the aesthetes, divided into 'Realistic Comedians' and 'High Tragedians', would enter duelling with quills; the fight was to be broken up by a trio of Cranks. Thus joined, the battle would continue in an undertone, with frequent eruptions, throughout the play; the aesthetes' constant comment on the action, and their strenuous exhortations to the actors, would furnish the temporal frame. This was one of the very earliest applications of illusion-destroying 'art as art' gimmickry, soon to become such a modernist cliché. What makes it historically significant is the clarity of its descent from an 18th-century aristocratic model. Even if Prokofiev had never set it, Meyerhold's *Love for Three Oranges* would have been a prime document of the emergent modernist sensibility and of its sources.

Thanks to Prokofiev, it is more than a document. Having secured a commission from Cleofonte Campanini, the director of the Chicago Grand Opera, who had wanted to produce *The Gambler* but was unable to obtain the materials from revolutionary Petrograd, the composer went to work on the music early in 1919 and delivered the completed score on 1 October. But it took more than two years before the opera achieved production, first because of Campanini's sudden death but second because of Prokofiev's impossible demands (he insisted on compensation for the delay in implementing the contract). Mary Garden, who took over the directorship of the Chicago company, finally agreed to his terms, and the opera was given under his baton, with Nina Koshetz as Fata Morgana. Its enormously successful Soviet premières took place in 1926 (Leningrad, Academic Theatre, formerly and now the Mariinsky, with Ivan Yershov as Truffaldino) and 1927 (Moscow, Bol'shoi Theatre under

Golovanov, with Nadezhda Obukhova as Clarice and Antonina Nezhdanova as Ninetta). These triumphs played a significant role in persuading Prokofiev to return to his homeland in the 1930s.

Compared with Meyerhold's scenario, Prokofiev's opera shows the usual streamlining and minor alterations. The most noteworthy difference is the hugely expanded role Prokofiev accorded the 'Greek chorus' of onstage spectators – the very thing Meyerhold and his colleagues had already so significantly expanded from Gozzi's little 'quarrel trio'. To Meyerhold's Comedians, Tragedians and Cranks (the latter numbering three in the scenario, ten in the opera), Prokofiev added groups of 'Lyricists', forever demanding 'romantic love, moons, tender kisses', and 'Empty Heads', bent on 'entertaining nonsense, witty double-entendres, fine costumes'. In this way he thought to cover every sort of standard operatic situation and cliché (what in Russian is still called *vampuka* after a famous grand-opera lampoon first produced at a St Petersburg cabaret in 1909). The Comedians, Tragedians, Lyricists and Empty Heads are continually breaking in on the action of Prokofiev's opera as it approaches one or another of their pet stereotypes to egg it on. His Cranks, eager to foil all factions (but particularly the Tragedians), do more than that: they actually intervene in the plot, Pirandello-fashion (but before Pirandello!), change its course and utterly destroy all stage illusion. The play, literally, is their plaything. (And art, the composer implies, is ours.) When Prokofiev's forgotten opera was given its earliest postwar revivals (especially the Ljubljana revival of 1956 that travelled to the Holland Festival and was recorded there), critics were struck by the mutually validating affinity between the ironically detached, constantly interrupted antics on stage and the characteristically discontinuous structure of the music. That remains the most authentic of the opera's virtues.

Prologue *A grand proscenium with towers on either side, each with little balconies and balustrades* The opening skirmish between the Cranks on the one hand and the Tragedians, the Comedians, the Lyricists and the Empty Heads on the other. As the Cranks announce the beginning of the play, the Trumpeteer gives the signal (bass trombone in the orchestra) for the curtain to go up. (This scene provides the material for the first movement, 'Cranks', in the concert suite from *The Love for Three Oranges*, op.33/ *bis*.)

Act 1.i The royal palace The King consults with his physicians over the Prince's hypochondria. Only laughter, he is advised, will cure his son. He decides, with Pantalone and Leander (the latter secretly plotting with Clarice against the Prince), to arrange entertainments and charges Truffaldino to oversee them.

1.ii Before a cabbalistic drop curtain Celio and Fata Morgana, protectors respectively of the King of Clubs and his arch-enemy the King of Spades (Leander), play three rounds of cards while their attendant imps frolic about. Celio loses all three hands, to the Cranks' dismay. (This scene provides the material for the second movement, 'Infernal Scene', of the suite.)

1.iii The royal palace Leander and Clarice plot to worsen the Prince's hypochondria, thus paving Clarice's way to the throne. She advises 'opium or a bullet'; Leander retorts that booming 'Martellian verses' (the one surviving – and possibly unwitting – reference in Prokofiev's libretto to the old Venetian disputes) will do.

Act 2.i The bedroom of the hypochondriac Prince Truffaldino tries in vain to get the Prince to laugh by dancing, then forcibly rouses him for the entertainments (heralded offstage

by the first of several versions of the March; the fully elaborated March that forms the third movement in the suite is a conflation of all the versions heard in the opera, but is based chiefly on the reprise that forms the entr'acte between this scene and the next).

2.ii *The great courtyard of the royal palace* The Prince is singularly unamused by Truffaldino's entertainments (a mock battle of monsters with enormous heads, and a pair of fountains pouring forth oil and wine – the latter a survival from Gozzi's scenario, where the oil and wine, both rancid, had stood for Goldoni and Chiari). Fata Morgana enters to make sure the Prince does not laugh. Truffaldino collides with her, causing her to fall back and expose her knobby knees and withered behind. At this the Prince goes into gales of laughter, represented in the music by a little set piece over an ostinato (and with the Prince's 'Ha-ha-ha-ha' inevitably parodying the opening unison in Beethoven's Fifth). Enraged, Fata Morgana curses the Prince with a fatal passion for three oranges, which he must seek to the ends of the earth. He rushes off with Truffaldino to find them, the devil Farfarello propelling them with his magic bellows.

Act 3.i *A desert* Celio intervenes on the Prince's behalf. He conjures up Farfarello, who blows the Prince and Truffaldino on stage. Celio informs them that the oranges they seek are in the kitchen of the palace of the witch Creonta, guarded by a cook with a lethal ladle. He gives Truffaldino a ribbon to distract the cook, and warns that when the oranges have been secured they must be opened only in the presence of water. Farfarello blows up a storm, which carries the pair off towards Creonta's palace. (The orchestral scherzo symbolizing their flight serves as an entr'acte in the opera and as the fourth movement of the suite.)

3.ii *The courtyard of Creonta's palace* Having distracted the cook with Celio's ribbon, the Prince and Truffaldino sneak into the kitchen (offstage) and make off with the oranges. They are transported back to the desert (so the next entr'acte tells us) by a reprise of the scherzo.

3.iii *The desert* The oranges have grown to enormous size. Weary of lugging them, the Prince and Truffaldino lie down to sleep. Truffaldino is too thirsty to sleep. He cuts one of the oranges to get some juice. Instead a fairy princess emerges, calling for water. Truffaldino opens a second orange to get juice for the two of them. A second princess emerges, also calling for water. The two princesses die of thirst; the horrified Truffaldino rushes offstage in a panic. The Prince awakens and finds the bodies. He nonchalantly orders four passing soldiers to bury them. Then he cuts into the third orange. Princess Ninetta emerges and is about to share the fate of her predecessors, but the Cranks lower a pail of water from their turret and save her life. A great love duet seems imminent, only to be spoilt by the Lyricists, who break into a paeon in praise of love duets. (The thirst music, the recognition music and the aborted love music furnish the materials for the fifth movement, 'The Prince and the Princess', of the suite.) Ninetta refuses to go with the Prince without suitable clothes. He goes off to fetch them for her. Fata Morgana now enters with Smeraldina in tow. By means of a magic pin they turn Ninetta into a rat and Smeraldina takes her place. The King and his retinue accompany the Prince back to the desert to the strains of the familiar March. They are dismayed to discover Smeraldina, but the King commands his son to proceed with the wedding.

Act 4.i *The drop curtain (as 1.ii)* Celio and Fata Morgana have it out: the latter gets the upper hand, but the Cranks come once again to the rescue, abduct her to their tower and bid Celio turn the rat back into Ninetta.

4.ii *The throne room of the royal palace* The King and his retinue enter to one last reprise of the March. When the curtains around the Princess's throne are drawn back the rat is discovered. Pandemonium ensues, during which Celio manages to turn the rat back into Ninetta. Truffaldino arrives out of nowhere to expose Smeraldina; she is sentenced to hang, along with Clarice and Leander. As the rope is prepared, they all make a run for it. (The music accompanying their breakout forms the basis of the final suite movement, entitled 'Flight'.) Fata Morgana appears and opens a trap door for them into which they (and she) disappear. The remaining *dramatis personae* hail the Prince and the Princess.

Like *The Gambler*, *The Love for Three Oranges* is basically in what Prokofiev called a 'declamatory' style; but ('taking American tastes into account', as he put it in his autobiography) the composer provided a few more obviously lyrical moments cast in fugitive rounded forms, and there are a couple of diverting instrumental showpieces (the March in Act 2, the Scherzo in Act 3). The musical style as such derives from Rimsky-Korsakov's *Golden Cockerel* by way of Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. Its nub and essence is the exploitation of the harmonic possibilities of paired triads with roots a tritone apart. These harmonies function variously as a cadential succession (as in the opening announcement, in the prologue, of the start of the show), as a vertical 'polychord' (at moments of horror; e.g. the curse music in Act 2 scene ii) or as the governors of a bipolar tonal plan (as in the Act 3 Scherzo).

For a set design for the original production see [Anisfeld, boris izrayevich](#).

Richard Taruskin