

PROKOFIEV AND HIS MASTERPIECE

David C F Wright DMus

To Humphrey Searle on his 60th birthday

If I had to say who my favourite Russian composer was, I would have great difficulty. It certainly would not be Tchaikovsky. His music has serious flaws and is really grand light music although some of his music is very fine such as the Fantasy Overture: Hamlet and the String Quartet no. 3 in E flat minor. Rimsky-Korsakov is a far better composer. I enjoy Stravinsky because of his inventiveness and some of his works are masterpieces. I have always admired the symphonies of Glazunov and there is no doubt that Shostakovich is a great composer but much of his music seems to be padding, time spinning and both inactive and uninspired. Yet no one could dispute the magnificence of some of his symphonic literature. Gliere is a composer of talent and skill, Prokofiev is possibly the most versatile composer although I am troubled at his sardonic humour at times. The finest Russian composer is Miaskovsky with 27 symphonies, nine string quartets and many other works to his name. Unlike Havergal Brian and Henry Cowell who both composed many symphonies, all of Miaskovsky's symphonies are real symphonies.

The word masterpiece is used too often. It has two basic meanings. Firstly, a work of flawless technique and originality which has great communicative effect. Sadly, many works deemed to be masterpieces are not. The second meaning is that work of a composer which is considered his finest.

Of course, this raises problems. What is Mozart's masterpiece (singular)? Or what are Beethoven's masterpieces (plural)?

From the point of view of flawless technique, originality and stunning communicative skill there is no doubt that Prokofiev's Symphony no. 6 in E flat minor is his masterpiece.

That greatest of all Russian conductors, Eugeny Mravinsky said, "I would not change a note of it."

Mravinsky gave the premiere in Leningrad in October 1947. It was received politely but not enthusiastically as was the composer when he came forward to take a bow. Even today, the famous Symphony no. 1 in D, the Classical, has many performances to the comparative few of Symphony no.6.

The Symphony no. 6, Op. 111 is considered a war symphony. It is easily forgotten how Russia suffered at the hands of the Nazis particularly when you recall that Hitler and Stalin had made a non-aggression pact shortly before World War Two broke out. While we must remember the appalling treatment of the Jews by the Nazis we should also bear in mind the millions of Russians, including women and children, who suffered and died at the hands of Hitler's evil socialism.

Prokofiev had spoken of the great victory over the Germans but spoke of the wounds that Russians still bore. He spoke of losing people that were dear to him and those who had lost their health and how these things must not be forgotten.

The composer was worried about many things at the time of the composition of this work His health as poor. He had problems in his personal life and the Stalin purges on music caused him to have doubts about his work. Prokofiev had had a bad fall which produced head injuries and he died some five and a half years later of a brain haemorrhage. Curiously he died 50 minutes before Stalin died. This was on 5 March 1953.

The Symphony is a memorial to the dead and a statement of hope for the living. But it is much more than that. It is a protest against the Communist regime to force music to conform to political ideology which hindered artistic freedom. This explains much of the sarcasm in his music.

Musically the symphony explores emotional depths. Yet it is not a rag bag of unstructured music that wallows and rambles. It is a work of feeling devoid of sentimentality. It has been compared to

Shostakovich whose symphonies often seem to be statements and protests. Maybe that is so but where Prokofiev succeeds over Shostakovich is in discipline. The music is not allowed to meander or ramble without purpose. Prokofiev's form remains coherent.

The sound world to describe this symphony is remarkable. The previous Symphony no. 5 in B flat, Op. 100 is irresistibly enjoyable. Written in 1945, it may portray the joy of war's end. But its light-heartedness does not mean the work is banal. It seems to be a spontaneous outpouring of relief whereas the Symphony no. 6 is a symphony that counts the cost of the war dead and those who still remain, the broken and mentally damaged human beings, the children bereft of parents who, in their innocence, had no option but to learn to trust no one and to hate. Communism was a cruel master. War was crueller still. Prokofiev's sound world is now dark, sharp, tense, melancholy, strident and yet the music retains its integrity. The percussive element is highlighted by an important piano part.

The work is in three movements lasting about 45 minutes.

The work begins with a short introduction. But its decisive style sets the scene for all that is to follow. The first theme is in 6/8 and is lyrical. The second theme is announced by the oboes far removed from the original key and has a feeling of chanting or a lament for the dead. The music develops into being very powerful and the tender opening takes on a new guise of tremendous power. The mighty climaxes are magnificently judged. The orchestration is flawless. There are unforgettable moments. The music becomes darker again and the resolution of the musical argument cannot be achieved by a triumphant statement but by a surprising drift into the major key for the final chord.

The middle movement is an impressive largo. It is unexpected Prokofiev. Here is a rich chromaticism and anguish. The first theme is grief-stricken whereas the second theme on the cellos is more relaxed. There follows an amazing passage of anger. Then comes a section of unashamed nostalgia which has a passage for horns which literally sings. The opening material returns but in a different order and the coda ends the movement in A flat major.

The finale, Vivace, is equally amazing. Prokofiev now introduces a sort of innocence with foot stamping peasant dances suggested. Are these the days before the war when the innocent children laughed and danced with irrepressible smiles on their faces? Clearly, children are suggested here. Prokofiev always had a regard for the young and he acknowledged them in music. The twelve short piano pieces Music for Children Op. 65, the teenage lovers, Romeo and Juliet, in his ten pieces for piano, Op. 75, the Three Children's Songs, Op. 68, the Ballad of an Unknown Boy, Op. 93, the orchestral suite Winter Bonfire, Op. 122, which uses a boys choir and, of course, Cinderella which has a childhood connection.

The symphony continues with incredible wit. There seems to be a mockery of classical music and the tuba seems to have a mind of his own. This exuberance is trying to conceal something sinister which is about to reveal itself. The chant of the first movement returns and the composer marvellously captures a sense of uncertainty. The Vivace returns with the peasant dancing music but now it has lost its innocence but sounds somewhat regimental. The symphony ends suddenly on the triumphant major chord of E flat.

The idea of hope is shown in that each of the three movements ends in the major key.

Stravinsky did not like the symphony. He said that nothing justified its dullness. An American journal which dismissed the Symphony no. 5 as a mere bon-bon referred to the Sixth as an autobiographical confession. It continued by saying that there is no resisting the passion, sincerity and drive of large sections of the work.

Prokofiev had a rewarding friendship with Miaskovsky whose own Symphony no. 6 was in E flat minor, In fact, had it not be for Miaskovsky, we would never have had a Prokofiev.

It must not be taken that Prokofiev only wrote one fine work. I am not suggesting that. He wrote 11 piano sonatas although the tenth was unfinished and the eleventh did not materialize. Strangely they are

not played as often as those by Scriabin but Prokofiev's sonatas are worthy of examination. The Piano Sonata no. 7 in B flat, op. 83, given a good performance, is explosive.

In the field of theatre music, he wrote splendid opera and ballets, the latter of which are becoming more popular. War and Peace, Op. 91 has pages of stunning masterly and the ballet The Stoneflower, Op. 118, contains some of the loveliest music he ever wrote. I have always been amused by the seemingly absurd title of his opera The Love of Three Oranges based on Gozzi's play, but then it is a fairy tale.

His concertos are also worthy of study. The Piano Concerto no. 1 in D flat, Op. 10, is nothing short of brilliant and an example of what has been 'called Prokoflevian sparkle.' It is a marvellous piece of glorious melody and vigorous arm, hand and finger work. The Piano Concerto no 2 in G minor, Op. 16 is probably a greater work. One concert pianist said, 'It has everything. It is a real concerto.' The Piano Concerto no. 3 in C, Op. 26, is a curious work infused with a sarcasm I find troublesome but it has many fine moments. The Piano Concerto no. 4 in B flat, Op. 53, is for the left hand only, one of the works written for Wittgenstein who hated it and would not play it. The Piano Concerto no. 5 in G, Op. 55, completes the cycle.

There are two concertos for the violin Op. 19 and Op. 63 'respectively. They are both instantly enjoyable and very well written.

But the concertante work I most admire is the Sinfonia Concertante, Op. 125, which is a reworking of the Cello Concerto, Op. 58 which took the years 1933 to 1938 to realise.

It must not be assumed that composers are excellent at all aspects of music.

Prokofiev has difficulty in writing for the cello. He was used to writing concertante works where the soloist is higher in pitch than the orchestra. To write a melody for the cello in the bass register with the orchestral parts higher in pitch caused him problems. It was said that his Cello Concerto was really a violin concerto with the cello melodically soaring above the orchestra.

The premiere of the Sinfonia Concertante was first given by two inexperienced performers with the Moscow Youth Orchestra on 18 February 1952. Rostropovich was the cellist and the pianist Sviatoslav Richter the conductor. Pianists very rarely made even second class conductors.

I admire the Prokofiev 'bite' in this work and that he has, at last, triumphed over the difficulties of writing a concerto for what might be called a bass instrument. It is this spirit that pervades this work and also his masterpiece although there are diverse issues at stake!

One of the essential ingredients of any composer is originality. We can all compose music that is similar to what has gone before but there needs to be a pioneer spirit. Music does not have to be the sounds of pots and pans being thrown or a London traffic jam to make it modern.

Prokofiev proves that point!

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