2025 Prokof'yev – *Ouverture russe* op. 72

Sergey Prokof'yev
(b. Sontsovka, 27 April 1891 – d. Moscow, 5 March 1953)

Sergey Prokof'yev was one of the composers that contributed the most the renovation of the music language in his motherland and abroad. While studying at the St Petersburg Conservatoire (1904 – 1909), he soon assumed the pose of an *enfant terrible*, almost always placing himself in dispute with the traditional principles – theoretical and practical – that were imparted to him by his teachers Anatoly Lyadov, Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, Jāzeps Vītols, and Alexander Winkler.

Initially fascinated by the mystical boldness of Aleksandr Skryabin, he soon developed an innovative language, rich in rhythmic frenzy, plasticity, grotesque tones, which nevertheless often leave room for moments of intense lyricism.

He was 27 years old when he decided to leave the Revolutionary Russia and attempt a professional venture in the United States (1918). There, he had the possibility to sign contracts with outstanding institutions and artists, such as Cleofonte Campanini (1860 – 1919), for the staging of the opera *The Love for Three Oranges* (op. 33), and started projecting *The Fiery Angel* and other pieces. Unfortunately, not all his works were appreciated, and some of his projects met a stop due to the death of the conductor. Prokof'yev was strongly disappointed in his expectations towards the American music milieus. As he recalled in his memoirs,

> I wandered along the avenues of the immense New York park; I contemplated the skyscrapers in front of me and dreamed with cold anger of the wonderful orchestras that absolutely did not want to deal with my music; I thought about the critics, who continued to chew over what had been said and written a thousand and a thousand times, and who grossly mocked my innovations; I thought about the impresarios, who organized tours on the sole condition of presenting a universally known program, and feared the unheard of like the plague. I had arrived too early: young America was not mature enough to appreciate young music!

The composer initially moved back to Europe (France), where his success started diminishing, notably after the death of Sergey Dyagilev – the impresario who had helped much his career with his ballet commissions – in 1929. So, Prokof'yev retrieved the contacts with his fellows musicians in the USSR, and met a positive reaction on the occasion of two tournées in 1927-28 and in the early 1930s in Moscow and Leningrad. He was particularly appreciated by his ancient Conservatoire mate Nikolay Myaskovsky (1881 – 1950), the friend Boris As'af'yev (1884 – 1949), at that time a supporter of New Music, and by the members of Soviet avant-garde such as Vladimir Derzhanovsky (1881 – 1942). The composer Levon Atovmyan (1901 – 1973) was assigned to demonstrate that the Soviet Union offered him opportunities his colleagues in the West had no access to, in terms of status, commissions, publications, and remuneration.

The perspective of finding a warm environment in homeland, where his music could be not only understood, but appreciated at maximum, convinced him to move definitely back to the Soviet Union, and after a series of trips he officially relocated to Moscow on March 20th, 1936. Differently from Stravinsky, in fact, Prokof'yev was not completely closed towards the newly established government of the Soviet Union. He even perceived positively the notorious decree "On the restructuring of literary and artistic organizations" emanated on April 23rd, 1932, by the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

The Party re-organized the cultural system of the country by liquidating all groupings that during the 1920s had led a lively debate on art aesthetics. While the cultural conflicts between State and the intelligentsia involved all the artistic areas in similar ways, in the field of music it meant the closing of such groups as the Russian Association of the Proletarian Musicians (RAPM), but also the Muscovite Association for Contemporary Music (ASM) and other circles in Leningrad, which during the 1920s had led a lively discussion on the future of art in the USSR, and had evolved from competitors to enemies. At their places, profession categories were formed: musicians, critics, and

musicologists flew into the Composers' Union. Two years later, the Party had officially established the aesthetic canon of Socialist Realism at the 1st Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers (1934).

All this attracted his attention of the composer, who had asked his friends-musicians for more details and updates on the Soviet public press: undoubtedly, he understood that this was an interesting moment for the music environment, and he did not want to be unaware of what was happening. According to Christina Guillaumier, author of a most recent biography of the composer, Prokof'yev seems to have concluded that he was immune to criticism of the kind Dmitry Shostakovich received from *Pravda* (The Truth) (Guillaumier, 2024: 106).

The decree, the monitoring of music activities, and the articles published by *Pravda* in 1936 about Shostakovich's opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District* and the ballet *The Limpid Stream* were among the most tangible sings of the growing intervention of the State in the issues of culture. These events soon resulted in the involvement of artists in the dynamics of terror of the late 1930s and 1940s. In April 1934 Prokof'yev received the first threats at the premiere of his Symphonic Song op. 57. This did not prevent the composer from building his own reputation as a professional musician, and a career that offered him numerous commissions. However, the specter of the Party's censure became increasingly closer to him, and often led him to compromise and to accept the Party's priorities needs in order to carve out a certain margin of creative freedom.

In the last part of Prokof'yev's life, the Party's pressure became stronger, and the menace of Terror came close to the composer and his family, involving first his first former wife Carolina Codina (1897 – 1989) – who was arrested and deported in camp in 1948, and then him: in that same year Prokof'yev was publicly blamed of formalism along with Shostakovich, Vissarion Shebalin, Aram Khachaturyan and others, who were accused to mine the cultural pillars of the soviet official ideology and aesthetic by their attitude of non-conformation to the canon of the Socialist Realism. For sure these events mined his health, which gradually deteriorated from this moment onwards, until his death, occurred the very same day of Stalin's.

The *Russian Overture* op. 72 was composed in 1936, in the period when the composer was searching for a balance between the regime's claims and his personal inspiration. Although it is not the most representative piece of his output, this piece is characterized by features that are telling at the same time of his own language and of the context of genesis: frequent changings of tempo marking in order to indulge the mobility and strength of tonic accents of individual fragments; music gestures typical of Prokof'yev's personal writing, such as the entry of horns (with trombones) at m. 137 or at mm. 153-4, which reminds of analogous figures in the almost coeval children piece *Peter and the Wolf* (op. 67, 1936); lyric passages of late-romantic ancestry, reminding his youthful penchant for symbolism; finally, elements deeply-rooted in the specific tradition of the 'Russian style' of the 'Mighty Handful", notably the use of folklore, which was resumed in the 1930s.

In the Overture, Prokof'yev brings several themes into play, including percussive and elements that recall the language he used in the music for the Ballets russes. The first three have a dance, folk-inspired character. We listen to them immediately, one after the other: they rely on different instrumental parts (violins, horns, trombones) dialoguing between one another against the background of shimmering instrumental combinations (*Allegro con brio*, *Poco più sostenuto*, *Tempo I* alternating). This principle reminds Mikhail Glinka's variation technique known as "changing-background" or "ostinato" variations (and simply as "Glinka variations" to Russian and Soviet musicologists) – a device that involved an unchanging melody with varied harmony and texture, notably in terms of instrumentation choices. The composer used it in his second opera *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842), and perfectionated it in the orchestral symphony *Kamarinskaya* (1848), and it is important to notice that the 1930s in the Soviet Union were a decade of celebration of the so-called "father of Russian art music".

The fourth motif (*Moderato*) has a singing, sometimes lyrical, nature, and marks the first formal slowdown: it is repeated several times at various heights by different instrumental parts: violins 1, flutes, oboes and clarinets, solo clarinet, until the one led by the horns gives way to a section processing the material presented so far. This ends on an eighth-notes ostinato at strings and woods,

which rarefies the musical discourse up to a suspension on a wide *ritenuto* with caesura value (*Andante*).

The second part of the Overture opens with the appearance of a theme based on larger rhythmic values, initially led by violas and double basses, then taken up by the violins, and finally by the brass instruments (*Andante cantabile*). This melodic line has a reflexive, almost liturgical character, reinforced by the contrapuntal writing. It creates a rather static moment of intimate calm in the piece, after which a new, more dynamic section begins on the ground of a quarter-note ostinato (*Poco più mosso*). From here to the end of the piece (with a flexion at mm. 387 to 426 – *Moderato*), the pulse accelerates while repetitions on various parts of short passages create that typically Russian accelerando that has in Glinka's *Kamarinskaya* its prototype in the realm of symphonic music based on the Russian folklore. Brass instruments led a large value theme which acts as an epic melodic line in a context where strings and woods propose short dance-like passages, with frequent use of *staccato* (or even *staccatissimo*) articulation, or *pizzicato*.

This predisposes to the polyphonic principle of the gradual overlapping of the presented motifs, which is the ultimate aim of this score. The effect of the thematic overlap is grandiose, especially in the finale, where the materials converge together in an apparent polyrhythmic combination, generated by a collage of materials drawn from individual themes, which are bond one to the other by short transitional passages, and merge together in a sort of connective tissue.

The instrumentation is sparkling, and confirms Prokof'yev's consummate skills: the orchestra includes piccolo flute, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons and contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, bass tuba, timpani, glockenspiel, xylophone, a wide set of undetermined percussions (cymbals, tam-tam, triangle, castanets, bass drum, drum, and small drum), 2 harps, piano, strings.

The Overture was premiered at the Hall of the Philharmonic Society in Moscow, on October 29th, 1936. The score was published in Paris by the Éditions Russes de Musique in the revised version that the composer completed in 1937.