



Sergei Prokofiev: Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution

aud 97.754

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The fact that it took the Cantata some 55 years to achieve a UK performance may partly be explained by the huge forces required, of which more in a moment. However, that's not the whole story. It is, inevitably, a pièce d'occasion - and a highly politicised one at that - but even so it didn't find favour in Stalin's Soviet Union. You might have thought that a cantata which sets words from the writings and speeches of Marx, Lenin and Stalin would have ticked all the boxes, but such was not the case. When he wrote his excellent booklet note to accompany the Järvi recording Christopher Palmer had to admit that the reasons why the Cantata attracted disapproval were, at that time, unknown. He cited the conjecture of Oleg Prokofiev, the composer's son, that by the time the work was finished, at the zenith of Stalin's Great Terror, no one in the Soviet Union's artistic circles dared to put their head above the parapet. Consequently, everyone was afraid to take responsibility for staging Prokofiev's new score. Dorothea Redepenning, the author of the fascinating Audite note, is able to draw on more recent scholarship and it seems that Oleg Prokofiev was correct. In 1937 musical officialdom was wary of - or downright hostile towards - the idea of allowing the words of Lenin or Stalin to be set to music. Prokofiev was pressed to set different, preferably folk-like texts instead but he refused. After much frantic behind the scenes activity Prokofiev played through the Cantata at the piano in front of the State Committee on the Arts, singing the vocal parts himself. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this run-through went badly and the work was doomed. It was not included in the musical celebrations of the Revolution's anniversary and, in fact, it was not heard until 1966. Even then cuts were made to make it more ideologically acceptable in the Soviet Union during the post-Stalinist era. Kirill Kondrashin, who directed the delayed premiere, was obliged to excise movements 8 and 10, Palmer tells us, because these set words by the



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Prokofiev wrote the work shortly after his return to Russia from his lengthy self-imposed exile from post-Revolutionary Russia. It seems that he had been pondering a composition based on Lenin's writings for some years so this work was not written on impulse in some burst of patriotic fervour by a returning exile. It is scored on a lavish scale. The basic orchestra is huge, including quadruple woodwind, eight horns, four each of trumpets and trombones and a pair of tubas. There's also a vast array of percussion and an eight-part mixed choir. Lest they be forgotten, a substantial string section is also needed. But that's not all. Prokofiev also wrote important parts for an accordion band and for a brass ensemble that is completely separate from the main orchestra's brass section. There's a photograph in Audite's booklet which shows all the performers assembled for the concert. The choir and orchestra are squeezed onto the stage but two groups of players can't be accommodated on the platform itself; off to the conductor's left is the percussion department and on his right the extra brass are deployed – I count 14 brass players.

The key question is this: is it worth assembling this phalanx of performers for a work lasting just over 40 minutes? When I attended the Gergiev concert I reached the view that the sheer physical impact of the piece in the concert hall takes one aback. However, while I was impressed by this and by the technical excellence of the performance I was not greatly moved by the music. Having listened to this new Karabits recording – and made some comparisons with the Järvi – I've come to a rather different conclusion.

The Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution is cast in ten sections. The first bears an epigraph from The Communist Manifesto: 'A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of communism...' However, these words are not heard; it is a purely orchestral movement. Prokofiev's music, vividly scored, conveys a sense of conflict and lowering power. The music also struck me as having an air of menace but, since there's no Shostakovich-like subversive irony in this score, Prokofiev probably didn't intend to suggest menace.

The textual source of the second movement is an unlikely one for a musical composition: Marx's Theses on Feuerbach. Here, the listener is struck by the contrast between, on the one hand, the staccato writing for the male voices and, on the other hand, the rather lovely lyrical music for the female voices, which soars over the men's' material. Eventually, all the voices sing the lyrical music, which is very typical Prokofiev. There follows a short instrumental Interlude which features quite spooky orchestration.

Movement four, setting some words of Lenin, is music of struggle and determination; that fits the tenor of the words very well. Another orchestral Interlude follows. Here,

the music is urgent, even strident, and Karabits ensures that his orchestra projects it strongly. Then we reach the sixth section, which is the longest and most dramatic. Here, using an assemblage of extracts from speeches and articles authored by Lenin in October 1917, Prokofiev depicts the Revolution itself. There's a high level of dissonance and considerable urgency in the writing and the present performance is red-blooded and gripping. Throughout the Cantata the contribution of the Ernst Senff Choir is marvellous but in this movement special mention must be made of the clarity of their diction. In the hubbub I couldn't always follow the words but most of the time I could hear what they were singing. From about 6:00 onwards the writing is particularly tumultuous with contributions from, among others, an alarm bell and a siren. At 6:55 we hear the accordion band for the first time. I presume their involvement here and elsewhere later in the score is intended to suggest proletarian involvement in the Revolution. To be honest, the scoring rather suggests piling Pelion on Ossa as the movement progresses but it must be said that Prokofiev sustains a genuine sense of the fervour of the crowd and the febrile atmosphere of the Revolution is conveyed. In the midst of the musical melee a speaker is required to declaim some of Lenin's words through a megaphone. Here Karabits does the job himself – presumably leaving the vast ensemble to its own devices for a few seconds. Neeme Järvi has Gennady Rozhdestvensky, no less, to do the honours. It doesn't sound to me as though the distinguished conductor used a megaphone – I'm sure Karabits does – but his voice is marginally the clearer of the two.

After all this frenetic excitement, the seventh movement, 'Victory', is, as you might expect, a big, aspiring chorus which gives thanks for the success of the Revolution. At 4:16 listeners who are new to the work may be slightly surprised by an unexpected sound. It's the choir, who are instructed to march on the spot as they sing "We need a measured advance of the iron battalions of the proletariat". Their marching continues almost to the end of the movement and it's surprisingly effective.

Movement eight brings the first of 'Uncle Joe' Stalin's contributions to the proceedings – this was one of the movements that was cut in 1966. 'The Oath' is an extract from the oration he delivered at Lenin's funeral bier. This is a hymn of Soviet Socialist Realism though Prokofiev surprises from time to time through his rather restrained use of dynamics. At the end, however, there are no holds barred: rhetorical pledges of loyalty to Lenin's memory are declaimed at maximum volume.

The penultimate movement is an orchestral Symphony. Much of the music is vigorous and celebratory, though from time to time we hear passages in a gentler vein and these are welcome. The movement features a good deal of very typical – and very effective – Prokofiev scoring. The finale bears the title 'The Constitution' and it's another setting of a Stalin speech. The movement is something of a slow burner but eventually rises to a huge C major apotheosis. I recall that the audience responded enthusiastically to the performance I attended in Birmingham and the Weimar audience is no less appreciative.

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the Staatskapelle Weimar is superb.

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Sergel PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution, Op 74 (1937)
Ernst Senff Chor Berlin-Mitglieder des Luftwaffenmusikkorps Erfurt; Staatskapelle Weimar/Kirill Karabits
rec. live, 23 August 2017 Weimarahalle, Weimar
Russian text (transliterated) and English & German translations included
AUDITE 97,754 [41:55]



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