



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

aud 97.754

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Prokofiev composed this notoriously problematic cantata after his return to live in the Soviet Union, following nearly two decades of itinerate life in the West. Perhaps he was homesick, or perhaps, as he is said to have calculated, Rachmaninov already had the United States, and Stravinsky Western Europe, so there were too many Russian composers for the West to accommodate. This massive cantata was a rather transparent effort to ingratiate himself with the Soviet government, but turned out to be a horrible miscalculation, rejected for performance at the height of Stalin's purges.

In musical terms, Prokofiev created a neoclassical dramatic choral work, albeit one that assumed gargantuan form, with double choir, orchestra, accordions, brass band, siren, and marching feet. By contrast, Stravinsky's almost contemporaneous, 1930 Symphony of Psalms seems still more chaste. Stravinsky set conventional religious texts, while Prokofiev turned to the words of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. Lenin and especially Stalin turned out to be too dangerous for anyone to dare perform in 1937, and the work did not receive its premier performance until 1966, long after Prokofiev's death, and with the two movements based on Stalin removed (Simon Morrison's *The People's Artist*, invaluable for making sense of Prokofiev's Soviet years, provides ample detail).

With a different text, the cantata would likely have met a happier fate, even in those dark times. This is the period in which Prokofiev composed such popular works as *Romeo and Juliet*, the *Second Violin Concerto*, and *Alexander Nevsky*, and the *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution* is clearly their musical cousin. Among the work's highlights is "the Philosophers," a setting of Marx's *Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach* ("Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it"). The men chant an ostinato in low voice, joined by a melody by sopranos and altos which soars above them. A short movement taken from Lenin's *What is to be Done?* is exciting, and a longer Lenin setting cranks up the tension even higher, at times resembling *Alexander Nevsky's Battle on the Ice*. Kirill Karabits assumes Lenin's voice through a megaphone. An energetic six minute "symphony" (one of four instrumental movements) seems as if it escaped from a ballet score, while the concluding movement, quoting Stalin on the Soviet Constitution, ends the work with uplift and peace, again sounding a lot like *Romeo and Juliet*.

It is probably easier to enjoy this cantata for its music if you do not know Russian. In 1937 Russians dared not sing Stalin's words because he was fearsome. After



Stalin's death, they avoided singing them because they were odious. This Cantata is not alone in the composer's output. When it comes to great composers abasing themselves before Stalin, his 1939 Zdravitsa (Hail to Stalin) may set the standard. Yet Shostakovich's 1949 music for the film, *The Fall of Berlin*, contains a section, "Stalin's Garden," whose cloying angelic choir is either a masterpiece of obsequiousness or of cynical critique, or perhaps both. In any event, enough time has passed to listen to Prokofiev's Cantata as music. We do not ask if Mozart believed in the mass, or question if he should have composed *La Clemenza di Tito* to praise a reactionary Habsburg Emperor. Mozart and Prokofiev were working musicians, and sought patronage from those who were in a position to support their art.

There is a 1992 Chandos recording by Neeme Järvi which hold up quite well to this new recording. Järvi takes five minutes longer, but with no loss of energy. Karabits' zippier tempos work better for me, and Audite captures detail obscured in the older recording. If you have the Järvi version, you do not need to replace it, but if you are new to the work, Karabits is preferable. The CD booklet has a photo of the musicians overflowing their stage. It is difficult to record such giant forces, and Audite engineers have done an excellent job in bringing clarity to what could easily sound muddy. This recording is distressingly short in timing, but has lots of players, so at least on a musician-per-minute basis it can be counted as a bargain.

This work turns out to be better than many may fear, once the anxiety about Stalin is set aside. Still, it is probably of appeal mostly to those who enjoy Semyon Kotko and other less-performed Soviet-era music by Prokofiev.

Sergei PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)

Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution (1937) [41:55]

Ernst Senff Choir Berlin

Luftwaffenmusikcorps Erfurt/

Staatskapelle Weimar/Kirill Karabits

rec. live, 23 August 2017, Weimarahalle, Weimar

AUDITE 97.754 [41:55]



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