SERGEJ PROKOFIEV
Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution (1936/37)

Staatskapelle Weimar
Ernst Senff Chor Berlin
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Music for the masses?

"The search for a musical language suited to the age of socialism is no easy task for a composer, but it is an honorable one. In our country, music has become the possession of the great masses. Their artistic taste and the demands they make on art are growing at a truly remarkable speed. With each new work, the Soviet composer must be careful not to fall behind in this process of growth." Written in 1937, these were Sergei Prokofiev's reflections on the conditions of art and the artist's self-perceived mission in his rediscovered home, the Soviet Union.
The music he composed under this premise is certainly complex and often ambivalent, both from the perspective of the time and from our modern, retrospective vantage point. Though Prokofiev may have been filled with newfound patriotic enthusiasm, he was by no means uncritical of a regime that harassed its citizens, maintained them in poverty, and sought to subjugate art as an instrument of power. Prokofiev's own artistic maxims certainly did not always conform to the official dictates of "socialist realism"; though he did make concessions to the "tastes of the masses," at the same time he was (primarily!) intent on upholding his own musical standards, even if they were far from aligning completely with cultural policy. It was a stylistic balancing act made possible by the range of interpretation offered by the language of music, but which, during the Stalinist purges to which artists were not immune, was tantamount to living on the edge. Thus Prokofiev himself was not spared from harassment and performance bans.

Prokofiev's works from this period, when the Soviet Union was characterized by the troubling coexistence of shows of force and staged jubilation on the one hand with cultural ignorance and purges on the other, can be interpreted differently according to our point of view and our willingness to search for details beneath the surface glitter. It is also worth noting that the composer was himself torn between the love of his people and his exasperation at the current power structures in his homeland. His aspiration as an artist was to exert a positive influence, inspire people, and broaden their horizons – and when he realized that he had greatly underestimated his own influence, that he was in reality merely a pawn of the party, this caused him to grow increasingly bitter. And all this despite the fact that his return after years of self-imposed exile had begun on such a positive note.

Prokofiev left his Russian homeland in 1918, when the country was in the throes of civil war and revolutionary upheaval, a decision that he later described as purely artistically motivated. He spent the following nine years in Paris, London, and Italy, and in so doing, he certainly avoided unfavorable living and working conditions in his homeland. But Prokofiev often emphasized the fact that his time abroad, which had been planned for just a few months, was never meant to become a lasting exile. Indeed, he had left with the express support of Secretary of Culture Lunacharsky as a cultural ambassador of Russia.

Distance seems to have further strengthened Prokofiev's feeling of connection with his country, and in a later official statement, he expressed regret at having evaded the social developments in the Soviet Union for essentially selfish artistic reasons. *"I thus deprived myself of the opportunity of playing an active part in the development of Soviet life. [...] A wise man had told me, in vain: 'You're running away from events that won't forgive you for it. When you return, you won't be understood.' I didn't listen to him."*
There were certainly more than a few who understood Prokofiev quite well: those in the Soviet Union who stood for individuality in art, who suffered from the lack of freedom but who nonetheless felt incapable of leaving their homeland since doing so would have silenced their own artistic language – like Shostakovich, for example. It was thus all the more meaningful when Shostakovich praised Prokofiev's work: "Whatever [Prokofiev] wrote and whatever the theme of his compositions, he celebrated, in his music, his people and its ideals."

And Prokofiev did return – it was a homecoming in stages that was by no means easy for the composer, but all the more intentional as a result. He and his music were by no means forgotten in the Soviet Union: young musicians, above all, were playing, discussing, and imitating Prokofiev, the bold and defiant, laconic, sarcastic daredevil. The press was also awaiting the return of this "people's artist," even if it was uncertain what "Bolshevik harmonies" were to be expected from him.
In 1927 the "prodigal son" undertook the journey back to his homeland for the first time, his excitement and enthusiasm tempered by an equal measure of fear and anxiety. But it proved to be a triumphant return; Prokofiev came again soon afterward and returned more and more frequently, confessing, entirely plausibly: *"It's like this: foreign air does not suit my inspiration, because I'm Russian. [...] I've got to go back. I've got to move myself back into the atmosphere of my native soil. I've got to see real winters again, and spring that bursts into being from one moment to the next. I've got to hear the Russian language echoing in my ears, I've got to talk to people who are of my own flesh and blood, so that they can give me back something I lack here – their songs – my songs."*
He moved back for good in May 1936 – of all times, during the period when the first policies of Stalinist cultural control and enforced conformity were being implemented. But Prokofiev was initially the beneficiary of privileges. The cosmopolitan Stravinsky reproached his colleague for what he considered to be his political naiveté and striving after fame. But there is little doubt that homesickness and a longing to see his old friends were first and foremost in the composer's mind. Wherever it was feasible, Prokofiev sought to play a constructive role in the restructuring of Soviet musical life, and perhaps also to make up for lost time – possibly going a bit too far in the process at times.

He composed an enormous work in 1936–37 that bore the title *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution*. The original idea of setting excerpts from the revolutionary writings of Lenin and Stalin had already preoccupied Prokofiev in the early 1930s; a commission from the Soviet All-Union Radio Committee set the project in motion in 1936.
Composed in ten movements that combine texts by Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin, the work's thematic scope encompasses the early stages of the communist movement up to the Soviet Union of the 1930s. The impressive opening features the famous beginning of Marx and Engels' *The Communist Manifesto* (1847–48) like a motto: "A specter is haunting Europe – the specter of communism." This is followed, to particularly forceful music, by Marx's equally celebrated "Theses on Feuerbach": "Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the important thing is to change it." Precisely how this is to be done soon becomes clear when, flanked by instrumental interludes that bring it into even greater relief, the fourth movement tells of the consolidation of the Bolsheviks under Lenin and the emergence of the revolutionary communist movement.
Excerpts from Lenin's speeches and essays, appeals to confidence in victory, and also doubts about the future of the revolution form the basis for the sixth and seventh movements. They are followed by Stalin's pledge, at Lenin's bier, to preserve the dictatorship of the proletariat and further promote the dissemination of the communist movement. After another interlude, the work concludes with excerpts from Stalin's speech during the adoption of the new Soviet constitution in 1936, in which he expresses his "satisfaction" at the "historic victory" achieved by the Russian people.

A panorama of triumph, one might say. At least upon first glance. But from a musical standpoint, much of the cantata is decidedly complex and multi-layered, in addition to being masterfully written. Whatever the genre, Prokofiev repeatedly emphasized that the "simplification" of music, in terms of making it more easily comprehensible to the listener, was definitely the wrong path. Thus with all its revolutionary turmoil and strident melodies, its use of Russian folk music and its military crash and bang, the cantata presents a clear kinship with his masterworks from the same period, like the ballet music of *Romeo and Juliet* and the film music for *Alexander Nevsky*. Far from being merely a work of histrionic euphoria, it is thrilling music that is full of vitality!
If the composer gives full rein here to his sincere enthusiasm for massive ensembles, we can hardly hold this against him. Even the cantata's most clamorous passages are underpinned by a clear compositional structure, and the immense orgies of sound owe their effect to a contrast with dynamically- and structurally-reduced passages and more low-key emotional moments. Nearly 500 musicians were to participate in the cantata's premiere during the revolutionary celebrations in October 1937. Even if Prokofiev calls for almost preposterous external resources, with a colossal double choir, an oversized symphony orchestra, a wind orchestra, an accordion (bayan) ensemble, and an enormous percussion arsenal (including cannons, machine guns, sirens, and alarm bells), he never relinquishes control of the forces he has invoked, nor does the length of the individual sections get out of hand.

Beyond question, the October Revolution was an event of enormous import and wide-ranging influence. Is it not conceivable that Prokofiev, the cosmopolitan patriot, occasionally overdoes things – not because of his own delight in spectacular shows of jubilation, but to bring the mind-numbing banality of the current political climate to the attention of more sensitive listeners? Doesn't the grin on our face disappear the moment the full-scale orchestral tutti withdraws abruptly, leaving behind only the folk-style accordion passages that, completely alone, seem to panic for their lives? Doesn't Prokofiev surreptitiously (but significantly) cite works from the "Western" repertoire that were much more familiar to him than to the unsuspecting party functionaries? Is he not, in the guise of a uniform sound, calling upon his listeners to question things, to adopt an alert and critical attitude, and ultimately, to retain their humanity? Indeed, did he have any other choice but to communicate his message subtly if he hoped to be publicly heard at all? Or would it have been preferable to compose scathingly critical music destined only for his sheet music collection?
Concealing his true opinions or sweeping them under the carpet was never Prokofiev's forte. And thus the cantata became a work into which he poured his whole heart and soul.

This composition commemorating the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution remained Prokofiev's only contribution to the "patriotic cantata" genre in which, in the post-1917 Soviet Union, events of national historical significance were presented in a musically rousing but usually relatively unsophisticated manner. It is likely that he had intentionally avoided this form earlier, since it offered few loopholes for doubt and critical questioning. Yet it simultaneously promised the greatest possible attention – and the time had come for him to profess his ties with his own people and take a stand, yet without going too far and leaping over the precipice. While the majority of patriotic works from the Soviet communist era are rightly forgotten today, Prokofiev's *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution* deserves our attention and serious consideration both musically and as a historical statement – as not merely lip service, not just the beating of drums, but as a rich and multi-layered kaleidoscope of sentiments. In an article for *Pravda*, the composer himself wrote the following about the monumental work: *"I wrote this piece with great enthusiasm. The extraordinary events that form its subject matter also required an extraordinary musical language. But I hope that its turbulence and its sincerity will render it accessible to our listeners."* "Extraordinary language," "sincerity" – even in such formulations appearing in an official statement, we can be attentive to simultaneous nuances of meaning.
Prokofiev never experienced the audience's verdict, however, since the cantata was dropped without a word the evening before the planned premiere. What had happened? Interestingly, this last-minute decision to cancel the premiere raises one of the biggest questions about Prokofiev's *Revolution Cantata*.

Had the winds shifted overnight, with Prokofiev becoming a target of Stalin's ruthless persecution of those suspected of betraying the communist idea? Was the cantata merely too complex, too impetuous, too innovative for the simple minds of the party functionaries? Or had a knowledgeable and musically-inclined ideologue taken a closer look at the last minute and suspected that, behind the outward jubilation, Prokofiev's score was actually critical and ironic at certain moments?
The official word was that direct original citations of the great Comrade Stalin were prohibited – firstly because they would be distorted by singing, and secondly because they were combined with texts by authors who did not approach his (Stalin's) unparalleled greatness. In fact we do have to admit that, when presented alongside the quality and intensity of Prokofiev's music, the more the work progresses (with the Stalin citations coming later), the more the text seems like a trivial add-on consisting of trite platitudes. While the vividness and concision of Lenin's language is emphasized at first, the music completely outshines the excerpts from Stalin's (basically declaimed) speeches. Another statement.
But whether or not these arguments seemed plausible, the performers had to accept the verdict – and for Prokofiev the event must have marked a further step in the direction of critical distance and withdrawal from his own political and social commitment.

The *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution*, which to this day can hardly be experienced apart from its historical context, had to wait until 1966 for its (partial) premiere – thirteen years after the death of Prokofiev who, in an irony of history, died on exactly the same day as "his" dictator Stalin in 1953. But in 1966, the final two movements were omitted, since it was deemed appropriate to draw a cloak of silence over the Stalin era. Prokofiev certainly would have brought the painful subject out into the open.
The work is still rarely performed, not only due to the challenge of bringing out its historical relevance (and critical undertones) and its wealth of musical qualities and appeal, but also because of the sheer scale of the score and the ensemble it calls for, which can hardly be realized in a normal concert setting. But if the cantata has not yet been able to cast off the suspicion of being merely a piece of "functional Socialist music" (Andreas Wehrmeyer), this should motivate us all the more to give the work our attention, make it heard, and open ourselves to discussion.
The fact that the *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution* by Prokofiev, one of the most technically-skilled and musically-sensitive composers of the 20th century, elicits such divergent opinions is itself a sign of the seriousness that is present beneath the glittering surface. The (often ill-fated) entanglement of art with politics also merits attention in our current times, when authoritarian systems, populist slogans, and cultural-political dogmas are not yet a thing of the past.

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