

# SERGE PROKOFIEFF

(1891-1953)

One of the oddest features of Prokofieff's career was his return to Russia in 1934. Who would have suspected that this essentially cosmopolitan composer—as “stateless” almost as Stravinsky—suffered from an evidently genuine and overwhelming home-sickness? In 1933, he said to a friend in Paris: “I've got to go back. I've got to see some 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.” All this sounds a little strange coming from the lips of one whose style was so thoroughly Western, and whose early music characterized him as one of the smartest, wittiest and most proficient *enfants terribles* of the 1920's.

It may have been, of course, that Prokofieff himself sensed in the 1930's that his cosmopolitanism was not enough, and thought that residence in his native country might stimulate fresh and hitherto untapped sources of his creative energy. On the other hand, Prokofieff's personality, from the very outset, was singularly Russian in certain of its aspects—his sardonic irony, for instance, his love of the grotesque, and his basic, candid naïveté. It was surely this latter quality which produced (in 1936) the charming *Peter and the Wolf*, an early “entertainment for young people” which very properly has a place in the affections of young and old audiences the world over.

Prokofieff's output was substantial, and it is a pity that of his five piano concertos we hear only the third, that his violin concertos make such rare appearances in our concert programmes, and that his chamber music seems to be largely neglected. Of his seven symphonies, the first (the famous “Classical”) written in 1916-17, retains the solid allegiance of most Prokofieff lovers. Of his ballets, the colourful *Cinderella* was produced at the Royal Opera House in 1948. His eight piano sonatas (composed between 1909 and 1944; Op. 1 was his first, Op. 84 his eighth) have a fairly active concert life; rightly so, since in these sonatas some of Prokofieff's most inventive music is to be found. Of his operas, of which there are at least seven, none, I believe, has been produced in this country; the U.S.A., in this respect, has been the more enterprising. *The Love of the Three Oranges* received its first performance in Chicago in 1921, and in 1948 *The Duenna* (composed in 1939, the text after Sheridan!) was done in New York by the “Lemonade Opera” of Greenwich Village. It might well be in the late operas from Prokofieff's Russian period—in *Simeon Kotko* (Op. 81) and *War and Peace* (Op. 91)—that the potentially beneficial effects of Prokofieff's reunion with his native land would be most apparent and, possibly, most uninhibited by considerations of topical Soviet policy.

Although Prokofieff was awarded a Stalin Prize in 1951, he fell into disrepute more than once with Russia's aesthetic administrators because of his alleged “formalist” tendencies, and one fears that his satire, fantasy and naïveté, for which we esteemed him so highly, were not equally valued by those of his country-folk who held the musical reins. The fifth and sixth symphonies (composed in 1944 and 1945-47 respectively) suggest that the larger structures he attempted in order, as it were, to be seriously optimistic, did not really suit his talent.

D.M.