

The BobCasts



Episode 5

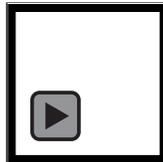
Sergei Prokofiev: The Pianistic Steel Trust

Welcome everyone. I'm Bob Greenberg, Music Historian-in-Residence for San Francisco Performances, and the title of this BobCast is *Sergei Prokofiev: The Pianistic Steel Trust*.

Prokofiev's music will appear on three programs during San Francisco Performances' 2020–21 season: on those of the pianists Natasha Peremski and Aaron Diehl; and in the piano and violin concert of Beatrice Rana and Renaud Capuçon on February 25, 2021. With all this play, I've decided that Prokofiev deserves a BobCast of his very own!

Sergei Prokofiev was a great pianist and an even greater composer, a composer who conceived of the piano not just as a stringed instrument born to sing but also, as a percussion instrument, an 88-key drum set, born to snap, crackle and pop.

Let's hear the opening of the third movement of Prokofiev's Piano Sonata No. 7, and while listening, let us think drums:



Prokofiev, Piano Sonata No. 7 in B-flat Major, Op. 83 (1942); movement 3

It's percussive, machine-age piano music like that that prompted one American critic to declare:

"Steel fingers, steel biceps, steel triceps—he is a tonal steel trust!"

Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev: Life and Personality

He was born on April 11, 1891 in the village of Sontsovka, in Ukraine. His father managed a large estate, and it was on that estate that Prokofiev grew up an isolated, lonely, only child. He was homeschooled and rarely associated with the local children, who were considered by the Prokofievs to be "social inferiors".

Sergei's talent as a pianist manifested itself early, and in 1904—at the age of 13—he and his

mother moved to St. Petersburg so that he could attend the St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he spent ten years. By the time he graduated in 1914—first in his class—Prokofiev was already well on his way to fame. Between 1913 and 1918 he composed a series of outstanding works in a wide range of styles, from his post-Romantic *Piano Concerto No. 1* of 1913, to the Fauvist primitivism of the Scythian Suite of 1915, to the Haydn-inspired classicism of his *Symphony No. 1* of 1917, to the musically and dramatically strident operas *Maddalena* (of 1913) and *The Gambler* (of 1917).

All of these works were written during World War One. As the only son of a widow, Prokofiev was not called up into the military, a mercy for which we must be grateful as Russia suffered nearly four million deaths during the war, equal to the *combined* deaths suffered by France, Great Britain, and Belgium.

Even as Russia plunged towards revolution, Prokofiev's career was thriving. In the fall of 1916, he performed his *Piano Concerto No. 1* in Kiev. In the audience was a young composer named Vladimir Dukelsky (1903–1969), who left us with this description of Prokofiev:

“He had white-blond hair, a small head with very thick lips, and very long, awkwardly dangling arms, terminating in a bruiser's powerful hands. Prokofiev wore dazzlingly elegant tails, a beautifully cut waistcoat, and flashing black pumps. The strangely gauche manner in which he traversed the stage was no indication of what was to follow; after sitting down and adjusting the piano stool with an abrupt jerk, Prokofiev let go with an unrelentingly muscular exhibition of a completely novel kind of piano playing. There was no sentiment, no sweetness—nothing but unrelenting energy and athletic joy. There was frenetic applause. Prokofiev bowed clumsily, dropping his head almost to his knees and recovering with a yank.”

(After later emigrating to the United States, this same “Vladimir Dukelsky”—on the advice of George Gershwin, no less—changed his name to Vernon Duke. It was as Vernon Duke that he composed such American Song Book classics as *Autumn in New York*, *I Can't Get Started*, and *April in Paris!*)

As it turned, current events creamed Prokofiev's developing career like that bass in the blender. Violent frustration over the Russian war effort led Czar Nicholas II to abdicate his throne on March 2, 1917. An armed insurrection brought Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik Party to power in November of 1917, and the Russian Civil War began. The Civil War would last for five horrific years, kill an additional 9 million Russians, and destroy the Russian economy, which has still yet to fully recover.

The 27 year-old Prokofiev did his level best to ignore the events around him. But events would not ignore him, and he realized that he could not ply his dual trades as a composer and pianist in such an environment. So he decided that the time was right for a brief trip abroad. Prokofiev later wrote:

“On May 7, 1918, I started my journey, which was to take me abroad for only a few months...or so I thought.”

In reality, it would be nine years before Prokofiev returned.

Writes Prokofiev biographer Harlow Robinson:

“Like so many other Russians of his upbringing and education, Prokofiev failed to grasp the

scope of the social and cultural transformation that was to come. Prokofiev's time abroad turned into years. By the early 1920s Russia had lost (to name only [a few]), Nabokov and Bunin in literature; Kandinsky and Chagall in painting; Stravinsky, Rachmaninoff, and Prokofiev in music. Many of these artists believed—like Prokofiev—that they were leaving Russia only temporarily. Some were confident that [the] Bolshevik hoodlums would soon be thrown out of power; others were simply waiting for the situation to settle down."

So Prokofiev decided to go to New York. Since war was still raging in Western Europe, he took the long way around. He travelled across Russia, took a steamer to Japan, and from there he sailed to San Francisco.

When he arrived in San Francisco he was detained by immigration officials on Angel Island (San Francisco's equivalent to Ellis Island), officials who suspected him of being a Bolshevik Spy. Prokofiev remembered:

"They wouldn't let me on shore right away, since they knew that in Russia the Bolsheviks were in power. After holding me for three days on the island and interrogating me in detail ('Have you been in prison?'—'Yes, I have.'—'That's bad. Where?'—'Here, on your island.'—'Oh, so you like to make jokes!') After three days they let me into the United States. In early September of 1918 I arrived in New York."

In the United States, Prokofiev was admired but not liked. According to the *New York Times* music critic Harold Schonberg:

"He was stubborn, ill-tempered, obstinate, and surly. He had pink skin that would turn red when he was in a rage (which was often). He disturbed everybody: always ready with a crushing repartee, with an irritating chuckle and a celebrated leer."

In 1923 Prokofiev decamped for Paris, which remained his "home base" until 1936. His success notwithstanding, Prokofiev never felt appreciated in the West. One reason for this was his compositional eclecticism: his music swung back and forth between starkly modern works, classical lyricism, and folkloric works. Neither the conservatives nor the avant-garde quite knew what to make of him.

The other problem was Prokofiev's personality. The people around him never ceased to be amazed by his incredible rudeness, which according to his pal Nicholas Nabokov:

"bordered on sadistic cruelty."

Prokofiev's narcissism also explains the single biggest mistake he ever made, the same mistake made by two other narcissists: Napoleon Bonaparte and Adolph Hitler: his belief that he could march on Moscow and live there in triumph.

Back in the U.S.S.R.

On January 18, 1927, Prokofiev set foot in what was now the Soviet Union for the first time in nearly nine years. He had been invited to concertize, and the tour was a triumph. Prokofiev returned again in 1929, 1932, and twice in both 1933 and 1934.

The success of these tours convinced Prokofiev to return to the U.S.S.R. permanently in 1936 and become a Soviet citizen. The Russian émigré community in the West was *scandalized*, and Igor Stravinsky spoke for many when he declared:

“Prokofiev was always very Russian minded. But in my opinion [this] had little to do with his return to Russia, a sacrifice to the bitch goddess [greed] and nothing else. He had no success in the United States or Europe for several seasons, while his visits to Russia had been triumphs. He was politically naïve, [so] he returned to Russia, and when finally he understood his position there, it was too late.”

Oh, at first, everything was great. Prokofiev’s return was a public relations bonanza for Stalin’s regime: the “worker’s paradise” had reclaimed a prodigal son. Prokofiev was honored and celebrated and, for a couple of years, he was even allowed to travel abroad. But then the clamps came down, and that was that.

We can only shake our heads. Did Prokofiev not read the papers? Was he entirely unaware of the collectivization and forced starvations that killed untold millions of Soviet citizens in the early 1930s? Of the show trials and reign of terror that corresponded precisely with his return? Was he not aware of the possibly fatal censure of Dmitri Shostakovich because of his opera *Lady Macbeth* in January of 1936? Did he not understand that the role of music in the Soviet Union was to promote the state and not to gratify the expressive desires of its composers?

Yes, Prokofiev knew about all of this. But he was convinced that none of it had anything to do with him.

He was wrong.

Dmitri Shostakovich understood Prokofiev’s true position with painful clarity:

“Prokofiev was an inveterate gambler [who] thought he had calculated perfectly. Prokofiev decided that it would be more profitable for him to move to the U.S.S.R. Such a step would only raise his stock in the West, because things Soviet were becoming fashionable just then; [and] they would stop considering him a foreigner in the U.S.S.R., and therefore he would win all around. And this is where Prokofiev landed like a chicken in soup. He came to Moscow to teach them, and [instead] they started teaching him.”

Officially censured in 1948, Prokofiev died a broken man on March 5, 1953, aged far beyond his 61 years. Joseph Stalin—the “great leader and teacher”, “father of nations”, “the great helmsman”, “the brilliant genius of humanity”, “the great architect of Communism”, “the gardener of human happiness” (are you ready to vomit yet?), Joseph Stalin died roughly one hour after Prokofiev. A telling fact: in the April, 1953 issue of the periodical *Soviet Music*—the official publication of the “Union of Soviet Composers”—Prokofiev’s death was reported in a blurb on page 117. The first 116 pages were devoted entirely to the death of Stalin.

Thank you.