

SERGEY PROKOFIEV

Symphony No. 7 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131

BORN: April 23, 1891, in Sontsovka, Ukraine

DIED: March 5, 1953, in Moscow

WORK COMPOSED: 1951–52

WORLD PREMIERE: October 11, 1952, in Moscow. Samuil Samosud conducted the Moscow All-Union Radio Orchestra.

During the middle decades of the 20th century, many composers in Western Europe and America, seeking to break decisively with the past, turned away from the most venerable genre of orchestral music, the symphony. Symphonic writing and its traditions were maintained at this time primarily by two Soviet composers: Dmitri Shostakovich and Sergey Prokofiev. The latter musician completed his first symphony in 1917, when he was in his mid-twenties. His last, which we hear now, came 35 eventful years later, during his final months of creativity.

In her memoirs, Prokofiev's widow offers a revealing description of the composer's artistic goals during the last years of his life. "He told me of his desire for a simple, clear musical language," she writes. "He had been thinking of it for a long time ... [W]hen he spoke of clarity and simplicity he would say that it was not a question of the 'old simplicity,' which consisted in repeating what had already been said, but of a new simplicity linked with the direction our lives were taking."

The "new simplicity" Prokofiev sought is the hallmark several of his late compositions, above all his Symphony No. 7, the last work he completed before his death, in March 1953. Prokofiev was not the first composer whose final maturity shows a paring away of surface complexity in favor of a more serene, direct and outwardly simple musical speech. The same trend may be discerned in the late compositions of Mozart, Brahms, Bartók and others. (Of course, apparent simplicity in a work of art may mask profound content, as the music of these composers reveals, but that is another matter.) In the case of Prokofiev's Seventh Symphony, however, several factors besides the intangible one of its author's artistic evolution prompted the work's transparent and accessible style.

Prokofiev originally intended the piece as a young person's symphony for the USSR Children's Radio Division, and though the work quickly outgrew this initial conception, a youthful, even innocent, lyricism remains one of its important features. More ominously, Prokofiev had been censured in 1948 by the Central Committee of the Communist Party for the "decadent formalism" (read "modernism") of a number of his compositions, a charge that brought from the composer an apology and promise to inform his works with a type of "melody that is immediately understandable."

It is difficult to determine to what extent each of these factors — Prokofiev's own creative inclinations, the initial inspiration for the work, and political pressure — influenced the character of his Seventh Symphony. To a certain extent they complemented each other, and it seems reasonable to assume that all three contributed to shaping the work. In any event, Prokofiev's final composition is an attractive and extremely melodious work. The composer uses the traditional four-movement symphonic design, with a sober and substantial opening movement followed by a waltz-like intermezzo and a tranquil Andante. The symphony concludes with a rollicking finale that provides a last glimpse of Prokofiev's signature musical wit.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR: Prokofiev builds the first movement on three themes. The first, heard at the outset, entails a broad and expressive melody for the strings and a running counter-melody that does not

replace the initial idea but, rather, augments it. This leads, before long, to another spacious melody, soaring and ecstatic and richly scored. Finally we hear a playful subject, assigned to the high woodwinds and glockenspiel. These materials merit attention, for they recur not only in this first movement but in the finale, also.

The second movement starts in rambunctious fashion but soon settles into a soave waltz that recalls similar music in Prokofiev's ballet *Cinderella*. These two types of music alternate throughout this portion of the symphony. There follows a placid Andante whose melodies flow like a clear stream.

Prokofiev begins the finale with a gallop, a kind of tune he wrote frequently, and often with a garish edge. Clearly enjoying this frenetic material, he rides it a good length, interrupting it only briefly for a march interlude. Eventually the tempo relaxes for a return of the soaring theme of the first movement. More remarkably, the composer then recalls the playful third subject of that same movement, but now more fully realized and sounding rather fantastic.

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