Prokofiev: His life

Prokofiev lived and composed in Stalinist Russia for 20 years, saw his wife hustled off to a labour camp, and died on the same day as the dictator in 1953. Peter Conrad finds both civic duty and subterfuge in his music.

Ever since Thomas Mann extolled the "sufferings and greatness" of Wagner, we have expected composers to lead heroic lives, of which their music is the fraught, arduous, ultimately triumphant record. Strauss even wrote a symphonic autobiography called Bin Heldenleben, in which his grandiose achievement is to pummel and rout a gang of sneering critics. Mahler, thanks to his illness, qualified for martyrdom; so did Shostakovich, tormented by Stalin's cultural bureaucrats. We are less sure what to think of composers who settle for diligent, lucrative professional careers, and refuse to dramatise their own miseries - Stravinsky, for instance, who mocked the idea that music expressed emotion and took pride in composing "strictly according to the precepts of the Conservatory", or Prokofiev, the sly, teasing, freakishly skilful virtuoso whose death in 1953 is being commemorated this year.

As a young man, Prokofiev took pride in his technical facility: "I would blacken about ten pages of manuscript a day," he boasted. In later life, he composed on trains, ships and in hospital beds. Creation did not involve struggle; it was a drill, an exercise in almost Stakhanovite productivity. Commissar Lunacharsky, allowing Prokofiev to travel abroad in 1918, believed he was exporting Bolshevism. But what had Prokofiev been doing during the revolution? He spent 1917 in Petrograd composing the jauntily anachronistic Classical symphony, modeled on Haydn. (The title, he said, was intended "to enrage the stupid".) Only for 40 seconds, in the 19th of his Visions Fugitives for piano, is the affray of the popular uprising audible: a percussive scattering of gunfire, the panic of fleeing crowds. Perhaps the lethal farce The Love for Three Oranges, commissioned by the Chicago Opera Company in 1920, is his account of the revolution, reduced to a chaotic comedy. A perky little march- his best-known tune, cheekily quo ted 20 years later in the ballet Cinderella - despatches the effete monarchists to their doom.

Prokofiev's speciality, he remarked, was "various degrees of the scherzo - whimsicality, laughter, mockery". He forgot to list the demonic or maniacal scherzo. Roulette wheels clatter, whirr and buzz in his opera The Gambler, luring a Dostoevskyan hero into giddy self-destruction, and the crazed visionary Renata in The Fiery Angel babbles in tongues and incites an orgy in a convent. In America, his performances of his own wildly dynamised piano music provoked one critic to call him "the Cossack Chopin", while another said that his Second Sonata sounded like "the charge of a herd of mammoths on an Asian plateau". His ballet Le Pas d'Acier - whose title refers to the steel steps of its proletarian dancers - choreographed the production line in a Soviet factory; Prokofiev the indefatigable pianist was credited with possessing "fingers of steel". After a recital, a black lift attendant in a New York hotel appreciatively gripped the muscles bulging through his sleeve, and wondered if he was a prize-fighter. Romantic composers ventilate passion in sound, but Prokofiev enjoyed being thought of as a robot, dispensing music automatically like the pianolas employed by Stravinsky.

He gruffly abbreviated his signature to PRKFV: the consonants, as Eisenstein said, made up "an ascetic drumbeat".

In 1928, he revisited what he called Bolshevizia for a concert tour. The revolution had already outlived its early fervour; it was becoming institutionalised and turning towards totalitarianism. The Comintern headquarters looked, to Prokofiev, like a "huge jar full of microbes destined for worldwide distribution". A production of Tchaikovsky's Eugene Onegin that he attended left out the scene when grateful serfs lay their harvest at the feet of a landowner, as this was considered "insulting to the Workers' and Peasants' Government". Irony had always been Prokofiev's defence: an early collection of piano sketches was called Sarcasms. He thus dealt with dogmatism by joking about it. Once he had to visit a friend at home in Marxistskaya Street in Moscow. The name was so modishly new that no one could locate it; Prokofiev complained that he wasted a small fortune as his taxi searched for the obscure address.

Despite the symptoms of a newly repressive orthodoxy, he chose to repatriate himself in 1933. He was surrendering, he explained, to the atavistic tug of Mother Russia: he needed to smell his native soil, to experience "real winters" and the kind of abrupt, convulsive spring that Stravinsky celebrated in Le Sacre du Printemps. Told this way, the story of his homecoming is one of naivety cruelly betrayed. His Spanish wife, suspected of collusion with foreign diplomats, was hustled off to a labour camp by the KGB; the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold was arrested during rehearsals of Prokofiev's blamelessly patriotic parable Semyon Kotko, tortured and then shot. But the critic Richard Taruskin has argued that Prokofiev's decision to return was shrewd, perhaps cynically self-interested, which makes his comeuppance less tragic. He recognised that he could not compete with Stravinsky in Paris, or with Rachmaninov in America, and reckoned that the unionising of culture in Russia guaranteed him power. Notwithstanding the brazen, barbaric din of his Scythian Suite - a thumping, primitivist assault on tame western notions of harmony and decorum - or his apocalyptic cantata Seven, he was never a revolutionary. He approved of Soviet musical traditionalism, and expected that the resources of the Bolshoi or the Kirov would be lavished on stagings of his epic operas and festive ballets.

The state, however, had more menial uses for him. He composed an orchestral rhapsody to mark the opening of the industrial canal that connected the Volga with the Don, and a cantata in which sirens, cannons and alarm bells stridently rejoice on the 20th anniversary of the revolution. His operatic version of War and Peace was endlessly delayed while he added extra scenes for partisans, underlining the analogy between the campaign to expel Napoleon and the war against Hitler. In his score for Eisenstein's film Ivan the Terrible, he was required to set the Stalinist Terror to music: Ivan exterminates the boyars and fortifies his personal power by amassing an army of thuggish, roistering bodyguards. Less persuasively, his cantata On Guard for Peace contains a lullaby in which a mother sings her infant to sleep by beseeching protection from "the children's best friend, who lives in the Kremlin".

Confronted by a governmental ban on the "neuropathic discords" of modernism, Prokofiev understood that the provision of melody was his civic duty. He described the striding, aspiring initial theme of his Fifth Symphony, first performed in 1945, as an anthem for "the free and happy man", suited to "the grandeur of our epoch". But the slow movement is doleful, slouching towards a dead end of grief, and the Sixth Symphony contains a wrenching, dislocated quotation from Wagner's Parsifal: a non-verbal cry, appealing for redemption and release. It is difficult to police the political correctness of wordless sounds, so Prokofiev came to rely on subterfuge. There were

official objections to his ballet Romeo and Juliet: even after he gave the story a happy ending, pandering to a compulsory Soviet optimism, the Bolshoi directorate rejected his score. Had the commissars noticed the thunderous, menacing tread of the dancers in armour at the Capulet ball, or the bludgeoning cataclysm in the orchestra when the Duke lays d own the law? Perhaps there is also a coded protest in the innocent beast fable of Peter and the Wolf. The hunters lumber about like a Soviet militia and fire their guns in instrumental fusillades, but it is Peter who outwits the wolf, relying on his own sneaky ingenuity. And though the predatory ogre gobbles up the ingenuous duck, he is too stupidly greedy to kill it. He wolfs it down without chewing, and at the end it can still be heard valiantly quacking inside his belly. The victim has the last word, and a funeral march speeds up into another antic scherzo.

Prokofiev and Stalin both died on 5 March 1953. The demise of the big bad wolf monopolised the news, as the empire he enslaved pretended to grieve; the press did not bother to announce Prokofiev's death until several days later. Half a century on, we remember Stalin only to execrate him, while Prokofiev will be honoured throughout the year in theatres and concert halls all over the world. History is irony in action. Its revenges may be slow, but they are remorseless.