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Sergei Prokofiev: The Relationship between Music and Communist Ideology

Outline of a Typology

FLORINELA POPA

Introduction

MY PROPOSITION is an investigation of the ways in which Communist ideology influenced the musical language of the Russian and Soviet composer Sergei Prokofiev, well known as one of the greatest musicians of the XXth century. In order to follow the complex interactions between Prokofiev's musical creation and ideology, I bring into discussion three items, namely:

- I. The Context of the Soviet Music from 1917 to 1953 (between the Bolshevik Revolution and Stalin's Death)
- II. Sergei Prokofiev's Place in the Soviet "Landscape"
- III. The Music composed by Prokofiev in the Soviet Union: An Outline of a Typology

I. The Context of the Soviet Music from 1917 to 1953 (between the Bolshevik Revolution and Stalin's Death)

1. The climate of the Soviet music during the '20s

IN THE newly-founded Soviet Union, the political changes had not left the structure of musical life untouched: "State ownership, by decree, included the theaters, concert organizations and conservatories, the publishing houses, libraries and archives. The opera houses and concert halls opened their doors to new audi-

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ences: workers, peasants and soldiers. Musical education was open to everyone and free of charge²¹.

Although Lenin widely aspired to an interaction between art and politics, in practice this interaction hardly took effect during the early years of the Soviet Union. Pre-revolutionary artistic movement continued to flourish; the Futurism, for instance, was given new legitimacy by the revolutionary events.

During the 1920s, the cultural climate in the Soviet Russia is defined by *artistic pluralism* and *open cultural exchange with the West*. Under Lunacharky's benevolent patronage (Anatoly Lunacharky was the People's Commissar for Culture), the arts had enjoyed a relatively liberal atmosphere that encouraged new and innovative means of expression. (Two such examples are Sergei Eisenstein's early great films and Meyerhold's constructivist theatre productions). As regarding music, the opera and theatre companies continued to offer their traditional programme (Tchaikovsky, Rossini, Verdi, Wagner). Also, during the 20s were founded two musical associations: the Association for Contemporary Music (ACM) and the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM). The first of them, ACM, pursued avant-garde experiments and encouraged such composing talents in the Soviet Union as Alexander Mossolov, Vissarion Shebalin and above all the young Dmitri Shostakovich. From its centers in Leningrad and Moscow, it developed an impressive programme of exchange with contemporary Western music. For instance, Schoenberg, Milhaud, Hindemith and Honegger conducted their own music in the Soviet Union; also, works by Soviet composers were performed in the West, often thanks to Prokofiev's mediation.

The second association, RAPM, an alternative group, had formed almost simultaneously with the Association for Contemporary Music to promote "music by workers for the workers". Virulently against anything "bourgeois" or modern, it placed itself in direct opposition with ACM. Unfortunately, the population at large was indifferent, even hostile, to avant-garde music, and the ACM lost ground to the RAPM.

2. Socialist Realism

BY THE end of the 1920s, the era of innovative pluralism in Soviet art was substantially over. In 1927, Stalin gained the power of supreme leader in the Soviet Union and in 1928 introduced the first Five Year Plan, a radical programme for the collectivization of agriculture and the development of heavy industry. Stalin's new policy of "offensive on all fronts" had a powerful effect on Soviet culture. In 1932, all associations were dissolved and replaced by monolithic artists' unions, among them the Central Soviet Union of Composers. The aim was the homogenization of the Soviet cultural life. Starting from the same year, 1932, Socialist Realism became the official doctrine of the Soviet art.

Difficult to define, anyway, Socialist Realism required art to fulfill social and revolutionary obligations. Art should create models for an optimistic socialist future, in a so-called "realist" manner. This not only forced the artists to submit to a

political programme, but also to a set of means, of technical proceedings. For music, the main requirement was *folk simplicity* and *national bonding*².

Among the conditions imposed by Socialist Realism to the composers were: the univocity, the clarity of the ideological message; the optimistic, mobilizing expression of the music. Any form of pessimism had to be completely avoidable or a musical work could be condemned as “formalist”, anti-social. More than that, melodies had to be hummable (cantabile) and keys had to be major.

All experimentation or deviation from these ideals was branded as “Formalism,” and condemned together with the “decadent music of the rotten West.” In 1936, Dmitri Shostakovich’s opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District* was the first step in the anti-formalism campaign:

*In January 1936 Stalin attended two guest performances by the Leningrad Theatre in Moscow: **Quiet flows the Don** by Ivan Dzerzhinsky and Shostakovich’s **Lady Macbeth of the Mtensk District**. With the same decisiveness that he welcomed the idyllic realism and pompous display of Dzerzhinsky’s work, Stalin rejected the directness and satirical bite of Shostakovich’s drama about adultery, murder, greed, passion, destruction and self-annihilation [...]. On 28 January an unprecedented article appeared in the Communist Party organ **Pravda**, attacking Shostakovich’s opera as **Chaos instead of music**. The opera was immediately removed from the scheduled programmes of all Soviet theatres. It was endlessly discussed in regional meetings of the Composers’ Union and the press. Explanations were submitted.³*

3. Zhdanovism, the extreme stage of this ideologized art

AFTER A relaxation of the Soviet art during the second World War, the Stalinist terror grew. Since 1945, Zhdanov had become the head of the Central Committee’s propaganda section. After Zhdanov’s Resolutions on literature, theatre and film, music finally came under attack:

The situation is particularly bad with regard to symphonic and operatic composition. There we are dealing with composers who continue to subscribe to formalist tendencies which are alien to the people. These tendencies have found their strongest expression in the works of composers like Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Khachaturian, Popov, Myaskovsky and others.⁴

Andrei Zhdanov’s Resolution of the 10th of February 1948 imposes the most absurd and humiliating restrictions to the Soviet composers. If earlier Socialist Realism was defined as an aesthetic concept, it became a political programme with a radical implementation. Although terms like *Socialist Realism* or its antithesis, *Formalism*, couldn’t ever be precisely defined, their use during Zhdanovism encouraged a suspicion and paranoia in the artistic community.

II. Sergei Prokofiev's Position in the Soviet "Landscape"

THE MAIN reason why I have chosen the Prokofiev's case is that of the very tortuous course of his creation, highly determined by the political context of pre- and post-revolutionary Russia. He was born in 1891 at Sontsovka, Ukraine. Attended the Conservatory in St Petersburg (1904-1914); when he was admitted, he was 13, the youngest student in composition of the Conservatory. Prokofiev was Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov's student in composition, but he didn't develop any special relation with him. His favorite teacher was Nikolay Tcherepnin (teacher in scoring and conducting), who brought him closer to the recent European musical trends, to the radical Russian artistic movements, but also to the music of the 18th century (especially Haydn and Mozart).

Anyway, before 1917, Prokofiev was receptive to all the new artistic trends and "isms" of his time (like Futurism, Acmeism etc.), without allowing himself to be completely captured by them.

Prokofiev and the Revolution

IN 1917 Prokofiev stayed away from the revolutionary events that took place in February and October. Having retreated to a Caucasian spa town (Kislovodsk), he composed several works among which the *Classical Symphony*, *Visions Fugitives* and the *Seven, They are Seven* cantata.

These works (especially the *Classical Symphony*, considered to be neoclassical *avant-la-lettre*) reflect the lack of any revolutionary impulse in his music. The interpretation of his intention of composing a work in the style of Haydn in these circumstances still remains open: "Should this be taken as evidence of political alienation, youthful naivety, indifference rising from intellectual arrogance, or calculated independent-mindedness?"⁵ Later on, in the 1940's, when blamed for not getting involved in the events of 1917, Prokofiev replied in his *Autobiography* that he wrote the *Seven, They are Seven* cantata as an answer to the revolutionary spirit⁶.

The Western Period

IMMEDIATELY AFTER the 1917 Revolution, he has left the newly-founded Soviet Union with Lunacharsky's permission and he has spent the next 5 years in the USA. His decision also indicates, at that moment, the lack of any affinities with the Revolution's ideals, implicitly with Communist ideology. Actually, in 1918 he has affirmed clearly his political neutrality and the indifference towards this subject: "For my part, I don't bother with politics; Art has nothing to do with it"⁷.

Prokofiev remained in the West—in the USA, France and Germany –, for about two decades, but in 1936 he returned definitively to the Soviet Union. Very controversial, this decision—perhaps the most uninspired of his life—denoted anyway his acceptance and approval of the Soviet politics. As regarding his music, his return had

major consequences. The impact of Communist ideology actually reconfigured Prokofiev's musical style. As this decision raises many questions, it seems to be necessary a short exposure of his Western experience as a musician.

Prokofiev's musical style during the years spent in USA, in France and Germany (1918-1936)

HIS CREATION in this period can be analyzed starting from a concept used by the composer himself, referring to his own music: "polystylism"⁸. His musical discourse is a "polyphonic" one, with some semantic layers. Prokofiev's "polystylism" is based on humour, often achieving the irony or the parodical distortion. All these aspects are reflected by manifold harmonic, melodic, orchestral and formal innovations in his operas *The Gambler* (1915-16), *The Love for Three Oranges* (1919), *The Fiery Angel* (1919-1927) and in the *Symphonies 1-4* (1917-30).

As regarding the syntactic level of his music: seen as a whole, his musical language comes under the so-called "enlarged tonality". He never questioned the tonal foundation of his music, although he composed sometimes bizzare modulations, aggressive dissonances, polytonal formations, athematic melodies, sometimes bordering on atonality (perhaps most radically in the *Second Symphony*).

It is very possible that exactly this ambiguity of his musical discourse might have caused the reticent reception of his music in the 20's, in the USA. Actually, in the USA, Prokofiev's reputation as a pianist eclipsed his vocation as a composer. The journal *Musical America* showed photographs of Stravinski and Prokofiev with the caption: "The composer Stravinski and the pianist Prokofiev."⁹

During the 1940s he narrated in his *Autobiography* the American episode. Given the totalitarian climate of the 1940's, in this source the musician censored often himself:

Sometimes I would stroll through the huge park in the centre of New York and gazing up at the surrounding skyscrapers think with cold fury about the splendid American orchestras that had no time for my music; about the critics who reiterated Beethoven, what a great musical genius a hundred times and denigrated everything new; about the manager who organized long concert tours with programmes featuring the same old familiar numbers played fifty times already. I had come over far too early: the child, namely America, was not yet old enough for modern music.¹⁰

Closer to the Soviet Union

IN FRANCE, between 1923-1936 he mostly composed ballets, the many commissioned by the impresario Serghei Diaghilev: *The Buffoon* (1915), *The Steel Step* (1925-26), *The Prodigal Son* (1928-1929). Here he was frustrated as he couldn't compose in his favourite musical genre, opera. During the 20s, the ballet was in vogue and Diaghilev didn't let himself touched by Prokofiev's preference.

In 1925, a number of events bring Prokofiev closer to the Soviet Union. Paradoxically, the start was given by Diaghilev, who commissioned him the ballet *Le Pas*

d'Acier (*The Steel Step*), a work about the “new realities” in the Soviet Union. As he accepted this commission having not any idea about those “new realities” could be the proof of his availability to return to Russia.

The action of the ballet is based on industrialisation, on the sound of factories and machines and also the characters of this ballet are workers, peasants, soldiers. As Diaghilev anticipated, this “exotic” subject was a challenge for the occidental public:

*There were scenes involving soldiers, country-women in voluminous skirts, rubber-suited workers and a sailor, evidently the main character, danced by Diaghilev's new male star Serge Lifar. But most of the time it was far from clear to the audience what was going on: as Prokofiev noted afterwards, the libretto had clearly been written not by a playwright but “a painter guided by his visual impressions.” One scene, **Street Pedlars and Countesses**, deeply shocked Diaghilev's émigré friends: the street pedlars were shown fondling old women, then snatching their possessions in exchange for a bag of flour. The political significance of this scene, though, seems to have been lost on most of the Parisian audience, who watched the ballet with bemusement.¹¹*

The ballet *Le Pas d'Acier* was a great success in Paris and in London. The sonorities are nearby Stravinsky's musical idiom from the so-called “Russian period”; they are based on irregular/ assymetrical rythms, polytonality, ostinatos: “The dancers seemed transformed into the very machinery of a factory, vividly evoked by Prokofiev's whirring, stamping and grinding music”¹².

Starting from 1925, the Soviet Union pursued an aggressive policy to attract Russian artists scattered through the Western part of Europe, by promising them manifold benefits. Among the targets of this policy were “the musicians Prokofiev and Igor Stravinsky”, who had achived “world fame”¹³. This policy was Lunacearski's idea—as results from a letter adressed by him to Stalin, in February 1925:

These individuals are by no means hostile to us [...]. Isolation from their homeland is obviously undesirable. Some of them might happily return to Russia for good. Others have too many ties abroad and consider themselves basically German, French, and so forth, rather than emigrants. But they would like to come to Russia more often to share the results of their work with us. I have neither the slightest desire to repatriate emigrants in general nore to repatriate those outstanding individuals who, as emigrants, feel hostile to us. But it would of course be beneficial for those outstanding individuals who have kept themselves away out of misunderstanding or unspecified fear to renew contact with us.¹⁴

Unlike Stravinsky, who did not accept invitations from the USSR, Prokofiev made many journeys to Russia between 1927-1936, culminating with his final return in 1936. From personalities like them were expected solutions for a Soviet art, namely a Socialist Realist art (starting from 1932).

“Feelings of fear and misgiving”, these are the emotions that animated him during his first journey to Russia in 1927, at least that is what he wrote in his *Journal*, whilst in his *Autobiography* he highlighted “his *excitement* and *enthusiasm* on crossing the Soviet border”¹⁵. Actually, these two sources written by Prokofiev himself are essential in understanding the part played by politics in his creation, especially since the information which refers to the same events does not always agree when it comes to his musical works and his intentions concerning them. These sources are the *Journal* that he kept between 1907 and 1933, and that he gave up after his return to the U.S.S.R., and the *Autobiography* written in the totalitarian climate of the 1940’s, in which the musician can be often suspected of insincerity.

Until his final return, Prokofiev communicated and even collaborated with his friends from the Soviet Union: director Vsevolod Meyerhold, musicologist Boris Asafiev—who worked for ACM—etc. Prokofiev was also an important mediator for musical exchanges between West and USSR.

Some of his “Western” works were promoted and appreciated by some Soviet musicians, but, on the other hand, the proletarian musicians attacked him hardly, even after he started to compose music in accordance with the new official themes.

Prokofiev and RAPM

IN 1929, the trial of his friend Meyerhold to stage *Le Pas d’acier* at the Bolshoi Theatre failed under RAPM’s attacks. The RAPM asked whether the factory scene portrayed “a capitalist factory, where the worker is a slave, or a Soviet factory, where the worker is the master? If it is a Soviet factory, when and where did Prokofiev examine it, since from 1918 to the present he has been living abroad [...]?”¹⁶

The RAPM’s verdict was a condemnation of the ballet as “a flat and vulgar anti-Soviet anecdote, a counter-revolutionary composition bordering on Fascism”¹⁷.

In spite of this aggressive opposition and although Prokofiev was already aware of signs of terror and manipulation, he continued to accept the Soviet “courtship”. The reasons that determined Prokofiev to accept the role of a Soviet composer may be diverse (they are most likely of a financial nature, but he was also seeking professional recognition).

More strange is the fact that his final return in 1936 coincided with the first aggressive attacks launched by the *Pravda* newspaper against Dmitri Shostakovich.

Towards a new life, a new music...: Prokofiev accepted the ideological challenge and also tried to adapt his musical discourse to the new themes. Started from the 1930s, his musical language undergoes a simplification process and, at the same time, the concept used now by the composer is that of a “new simplicity”¹⁸. (In some regards it resembles the “utilitarian music” of Paul Hindemith, from the German area).

More than that, Prokofiev asked Gorky, who created the syntagma Socialist Realism, what kind of music should he compose in the new context. And Gorky answered to him: “*You* must know this thing”¹⁹.

Anyway, after the “-isms” of the first decades of the XXth century, Prokofiev’s works composed in the Soviet Union are in connection with *Socialist Realism*, and after 1948 with *Zhdanovism*, the extreme stage of this ideologized art.

I will refer in the following to the last two stylistic and aesthetical stages.

III. The Music composed by Prokofiev in the Soviet Union: Outline of a Typology

SEEN AS a whole, the works composed by Prokofiev in the Soviet Union, more or less under the influence of Communist ideology, are quite different between them, according to more factors: biographical, historical, his collaboration with contemporary personalities etc.

Following two principal criteria, it can be imagined a typology of these works. These typological criteria are: a) The embracement of (literary) themes of Socialist Realism (in musical works with text or/and with libretto); b) The adaptation of the musical language to the (rather vague) prescriptions of Socialist Realism. Combining these criteria I identified five types of musical works:

1. Works with explicit ideological message (with text or/and libretto), in which the musical solutions/patterns (at the syntactic level) represent exclusively the composer’s option (without the influence of any external constraints)

THE STEEL Step); *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution* (1936-7); *Songs of Our Days* (1937) for choir and orchestra. For instance, *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution* is Prokofiev’s first attempt at a large-scale work in the official political style. It relates the story of the Bolshevik Revolution and the birth of the Soviet Union, from the battle for the Winter Palace in 1917 to the building of factories and collective farms in the early Thirties and the final consolidation of Stalin’s control over the country with his new constitution of 1936. The texts which appear in the chronological order of the historical events themselves, were taken from articles and speeches by Marx, Lenin and Stalin. Written for 2 choirs and 4 orchestras, that means around 500 performers, this *Cantata* was a gigantic but unsuccessful experiment. The music of the *Cantata* is modern; Prokofiev used some avant-garde techniques: the collage technique, elements of concrete music (sirens, alarm bells, marching feet, cannon-shots, speaker on megaphone as the voice of Lenin etc.)

Perhaps fortunately for Prokofiev, this work was never performed during his life. The Arts Committee refused to allow the *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution* to be performed, as it seemed unacceptable to set Lenin’s and Stalin’s words to music. This fail determined Prokofiev’s detractors to affirm that he was not able to abandon his formalist tendencies and to adapt to new conditions²⁰.

Anyway, this *Cantata* was composed in a time when Prokofiev criticised the easy, effortless musical solutions, adopted by the many Soviet composers—specifically those based on folklore and on Russian music of the 19th century. The composer was convinced that his role was to form musical tastes, to create a new, Soviet art: “I consider wrong any attempt of the composer to simplify [his music]. Any attempt to accommodate to audience’s tastes not only underestimates its cultural maturity [...], but it is also a sign of unsincerity.”²¹

2. Works with explicit ideological message

(with text or/and libretto), in which the musical discourse (idiom) is (more or less) simplified in accordance with the prescripts imposed by Socialist Realism

OPERAS: *SEMEN Kotko* (1939); *The Story of a Real Man* (1947-48); *War and Peace* (1941-52). Film music: *Alexander Nevski* (1938); *Ivan the Terrible* (1942-45). Vocal-symphonic Works (Cantatas): *Zdravitsa* (1939); *Flourish, Mighty Land* (1947); *On Guard for Peace* (1950).

As regarding the ideological content, here are more degrees—from pure propaganda (as in *Semen Kotko*; *Flourish, Mighty Land*; *On guard for peace*) to timely parables (*Alexander Nevski*; *Ivan the Terrible*) or even to minor compromises (*War and Peace*). Although Prokofiev had initially intended the opera *War and Peace* to focus on Natasha and her suitors, Germany’s invasion of Russia forced him to create a more epic and patriotic work. A simplification process of the musical language can be observed in the works in discussion, especially in those written after 1948.

The first Socialist Realist opera: Prokofiev’s first Socialist Realist opera is *Semyon Kotko*, written in 1938-39, after a short story by Valentin Katayev, *I am a Son of the Working People*. Prokofiev’s first biographer, Israel Nestyev, wrote about the new subject and new techniques used here by the composer:

*The theme of Semyon Kotko was the complete antithesis of the themes of Prokofiev’s earlier operas. After the scourging satire and nervous hysteria of The Gambler, the stylized parody of The Love for Three Oranges and the mysticism of The Flaming Angel, the composer now undertook to depict Civil War heroism and life in a Ukranian village*²².

It’s very clear that Prokofiev’s “Western” works became tabu subjects. As regarding the approach of a Socialist Realist subject, this implies an obvious schematism: the characters are antagonic, without any nuances—positive *versus* negative characters. Also, the proceedings of the “old” musical language (like irony, dissonant harmonies etc.) could be used by Prokofiev exclusively in the imaging of the negative characters, the enemies of the Revolution.

The plot deals with the conflict between two hostile groups: the ordinary people striving for peace and happiness (Semyon, Sophia, [...], the Bolsheviks Remenyuk and Tsarev)

*and the enemies of the Revolution (the kulak Tkachenko, the landowner Klembovski, the German occupiers and Ukrainian counterrevolutionaries). This prompted the composer to employ contrasting musical material: warm lyricism, sly humour and elements of folk song for portrayals of the Russian heroes; coarse harmonies, harsh orchestration and caricatural devices for portraits of the enemies.*²³

Nestyev also criticised some aspects of the opera:

*The theme of heroism is poorly realized in the opera. The portrayal of the hero, Semyon Kotko, is kept too strictly within the bounds of everyday life; his ideological growth, his transformation into a conscious fighter for the Revolution, is reflected neither in the action, nor in the music of the opera. The Bolsheviks Remenyuk and Tsarev also lack heroic stature.*²⁴

It can be concluded that coming into line of Socialist Realism with subject and technical proceedings didn't guarantee the success of any musical work. As it looks like, Prokofiev composed this opera with a certain aim: to collaborate with Vsevolod Meyerhold as a director and thus to try to save Meyerhold, who had fallen into disgrace because of certain liberties he took in his art. Among other things, he has staged Puşkin's play *Boris Godunov*, in which the main character was like Stalin²⁵.

Anyway, Prokofiev's character Stalin from his cantata *Flourish, Mighty Land* reminds Mussorgski's *Boris Godunov*. In both works, the choirs, representing the people, sing an *ostinato* on the word: *Slava, slava, slava...*

3. Works without ideological message (music with or without a "story"—text/libretto).

THESE ARE neoclassical works and the most known and appreciated music composed by Prokofiev in USSR: ballets *Romeo and Juliet* (1935-36), *Cinderella* (1940-44), *Symphony no. 5* (1944), opera *Betrothal in a Monastery* (1941-1946). Among the main features of these works are: musical accessible language, but by no means simplistic; attention given to the melody and harmony, to the formal clarity; also, subjects as "innocent" as possible in relation to the official ideology, which, at the same time, permit the expression of very different affects (not only optimism and effusion).

Ideological "masks": However, Prokofiev takes sometimes precautions against possible ideological attacks and he appeals to ideological "masks": *Peter and the Wolf*, *Romeo and Juliet* (the first version, with *happy-end*).

Peter and the Wolf, for instance, is a symphonic children's fairy tale for narrative voice and orchestra. It's a pedagogical work, in which every character is represented in the orchestra by one or many instruments: Peter by the string instruments, the grandfather by the bassoon, little bird by the flute etc.

It seems like a “a naive story”²⁶, but Prokofiev associated it a very clear ideological message, explained by himself as a timely parable: Pioneer Peter personifies the Soviet Union fighting against the greedy capitalist world, specifically Hitler’s Germany. The conclusion is: *Pioneers like him are not afraid of wolves*²⁷.

On the other hand, in 1938, during Prokofiev’s last journey to the United States, he said during a discussion with Walt Disney that he had composed *Peter and the Wolf* imagining a cartoon made by Disney: “Prokofiev played through *Peter and the Wolf* and declared, in the flush of the moment, that he had composed it with Disney in mind. The famous director was greatly impressed”²⁸.

Nowadays is often given by the musicologists a socially subversive interpretation. In Harlow Robinson’s opinion, for instance, “the grandfather is the embodiment of rigid establishment opinion, parents, grandparents, the party, against which a revolt is not only intelligent, but likely to succeed”²⁹. Also, Daniel Jaffé try to understand *Peter and the Wolf* from the perspective of the Soviet public:

*To Prokofiev’s Soviet audience, Peter was ostensibly a Pioneer, a junior member of the young Communist League; but while Peter’s rebellious, anti-authoritarian stance might appear to chime with the official canonization of Pavlik Morozov (a fourteen-year-old whose denunciation of his father to the authorities «inspired» the founding of the Pioneers), Peter displays considerable loyalty to his animal friends and has an individual ingenuity in marked contrast to the blundering huntsmen (the state police?) who arrive late on the scene*³⁰.

An other example of ideological mask is that of the first version of the ballet *Romeo and Juliet*, after Shakespeare’s tragedy, conceived by director Serghei Radlov and by Prokofiev with *happy-end*. Such a solution was a natural consequence of the absurd meaning given by Radlov to Shakespeare’s play:

*a play about the struggle for love, about the struggle for the right to love by young, strong, and progressive people battling against feudal traditions and feudal outlooks on marriage and family. This makes the entire play live, breathing struggle and passion as one—makes it, perhaps, the most Komsomol-like of all Shakespeare’s plays.*³¹

Prokofiev has agreed with the *happy-end*, as he wasn’t able to conceive how the poisoned lovers could dance. Later, the composer was assured by the choreographers that Shakespeare’s ending could be expressed in dance³².

4. Works with tacit ideological message (instrumental music without “story” or with an unideologised one) (1948-53)

THIS CATEGORY includes the few works composed after Zhdanov’s Resolution regarding music, like *Symphonies no. 6, 7*, the ballet *The Tale of the Stone Flower* (1951). In 1948, Prokofiev, as others Soviet composers, was officially

accused of formalism and he became afraid. His past, his early career in the USA and in France distinguished him from his “formalists” colleagues. As the repercussions of the Resolution intensified, his career went into free fall.

The Self-criticism made by him immediately after the February Resolution indicates his resignation and his fear:

Elements of Formalism were still present in my music some fifteen to twenty years ago. I was probably infected by contact with a whole series of Western influences. Since the exposure of the formalist errors in Shostakovich’s opera through Pravda on the instructions of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, I have reflected a great deal on the stylistic devices in my music and have come to recognize the erroneousness of such a path. There then followed a search for a clearer and inherently more substantive language. In a series of my works, for instance Alexandr Nevsky, Toast to Stalin, Romeo and Juliet or in the Fifth Symphony, I have tried to free myself from these elements of Formalism, and to me at least it seems that to a certain extent I have succeeded. [...]

On the question of the significance of melody, for me there was never any doubt. I love melody very much, consider it one of the most important elements in music and for years have been working to improve its quality in my works. [...]

I have often been reproached for the fact that in my operas the recitative predominates over the cantilena. I love the stage as such and believe that a person who as come to an opera house has the right to demand not only impressions for the eye (otherwise he would not have gone to the opera, but to a concert). Yet every movement on stage is more linked to the recitative, whereas the cantilena carries with it a measure of immobility [...].

In conclusion, I should like to express my gratitude to the Party for the clear guidelines in the Resolution, which are of help to me in my search for a comprehensible musical language intimately connected with the people, which is worthy of our people and our great country.³³

Prokofiev’s final works, composed after the storm of 1948, are characterized by a decline in melodic, harmonic and rhythmic invention. Between 1948-1953, the censorship affects many of his works and, at the end of his life, Prokofiev did not so much compose freely, but as respond to criticism.

Unfortunately, his musical message suffered an unprecedented simplification: he adopted a musical language based on folklore and on Russian music of the 19th century—as, for instance, in the ballet *The Tale of the Stone Flower*:

*Prokofiev transformed The Tale of the Stone Flower into a primer on nineteenth-century Russian music, filling the divertissements with kuchkist-era folksong abstractions. The roster of nationalist (exoticist) clichés includes the pentatonic scale, quartal-quintal cadences and chordal progressions from the tonic major to the tonic augmented to the flattened submediant. Prokofiev uses folklike melodies as *canti firmi*, decorating*

them with orchestral figurations of increasing lavishness. He drew inspiration for his dances from recordings of folksongs from Sverdlovsk, which he obtained from the Moscow Conservatory library. [...] Prokofiev assigned [to the numbers of the ballet] emblematic Chaikovskian tonalities (D major defines the rustic world, A major the magic world, E major and E minor the powers of good and evil) and timbres (the oboe denotes *Katerina* [the main female character], the French horn the *Mistress*, the E-flat clarinet *Severyan*). The interlacing of diatonic, modal and chromatic gestures on the surface of the score resembles Glinka's *Ruslan and Lyudmila*.³⁴

Also, in his 7th Symphony (1951-1952) the composer changed immediately the *Finale*, when he was told by the conductor Samuil Samosud do it. Actually, Samosud, who conducted the premiere, warned him that “the lugubrious conclusion did not accord with the official taste”: “The finale does not end in joy so [...], would it not be possible an alternate finale with a happy ending?”³⁵

Anyway, the Symphony looks-like a thesaurus of familiar clichés from the conventional Soviet music of the day. But, however, its author does not seem indifferent to the unprecedented simplification of his musical message. At the first hearing of his 7th Symphony, Prokofiev said to Dmitri Kabalevsky: “Is not the music perhaps too simple?”³⁶

5. Works with subversive elements

WITH HIS first years in the Soviet Union, Prokofiev realized the abuses and crimes of the Soviet power. The arrest and assassination of director Meyerhold is a clear example. In his music, Prokofiev tried, if possible, to escape from the ideological constraints. The subversive dimension of his music is reflected by a “polyphonic” discourse (in the meaning given by the theoretician of literature Mikhail Bakhtin)³⁷.

This can be observed in *Zdravitsa/Hail to Stalin*, a Cantata composed in 1939, a short while after Meyerhold's arrest. It was Prokofiev's birthday present for Stalin, on the occasion of the dictator's 60th anniversary. Although the score indicates that the *Zdravitsa* libretto comes from Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian, Kumik, Kurd, Mari and Mordovian sources, the verses selected for the Cantata are examples of invented folklore and the “anonymous” texts are by official writers³⁸. Some musicologists (for instance, Vladimir Zak) consider *Zdravitsa* a real “art of subtext”³⁹. Others, like Simon Morrison, affirm that “there is no subversion in the work, no contestation of cults of personalities. [...] [*Zdravitsa*] shows Prokofiev seeking and finding the formula for official approval”⁴⁰.

Anyway, the subtle irony accompanies more episodes. For example, in the orchestral introduction, the hint to the “Balcony scene” from *Romeo and Juliet* is a sort of ironical prologue for the verses where Stalin is grossly praised.

Also, an episode of this Cantata tells the tale of a young villager named Aksinya who is sent to Moscow for a Kremlin meeting with Stalin—her symbolic husband—

in honor of her work. Prokofiev modelled the music of this episode on the laments that are traditionally sung in village settings before the weddings of young brides. Here are some verses of this episode:

*Ah, yesterday we were singing songs and revelling,
but it was not a toast for the auburn plait,
we weren't marrying off Aksinya –
we were seeing off Aksinya on her visit to Stalin.*

*We saw her off on her journey to the capital Moscow,
and we decked her up like a young bride.
The lovely Aksinya went through the gates:
good looking and pretty she was in new boots.
We took her to the edge of our village
and with her we sent our greetings to Stalin.*

Also, *Piano Sonata no. 7* (1942) contains subversive elements. For example, in the slow movement could be detected a reference to the Schumann's lied called *Wehmut* ("Sadness"), on Eichendorff's text, from *Liederkreis op. 39*. The verses of this lied are: *Ich kann wohl manchmal singen, / Als ob ich fröhlich sei; / Doch heimlich Tränen dringen, / Da wird das Herz mir frei.* (*Sometimes I can sing/ As if I were happy/ But secretly tears well up/ And free my heart*).

Instead of conclusions...

PROKOFIEV WAS destined to live in conflicting worlds. Choosing to live in the Soviet Union after the years spent in the West, he attracted the hostility of both "sides". What could mean his choice to return to Russia? Political naïveté? Uninspired opportunism? It's hard to tell. But the fact that he always deemed creation the most important of his preoccupations, regardless of where and how he lived is a certainty. However ironically, the music shared the destiny of its author, even after his death. The reception of Prokofiev's creation in the East and West remained fractured for decades—at least apparently: the historiography of Soviet music ignored and often denigrated Prokofiev's activity in Western modern circles, while Western musicology criticized the much simpler, politically determined idiom of the Soviet years.

The fact that some works—considered models of Socialist Realism—were also appreciated in the West: *Peter and the Wolf*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cinderella*, *Symphony no. 5* and others, could be regarded as an "anomaly". Similarly, the Eastern audience has never seemed annoyed by the fact that, for instance, the opera *The Love for Three*

Oranges was composed in America. During the last two decades, there is a growing interest for those works which never escaped the stigmata of “official music” (*Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution; Hail to Stalin; Flourish, Mighty Land; Semen Kotko* etc.). Understood correctly, in the context of their writing, they remain living documents of a devastating epoch for humanity.

Many of the Russian composer’s works have gone beyond any political barriers or prejudices. They charm audiences worldwide and convince each generation that Prokofiev, undeniably one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century, has still a lot to say through his music.



Notes

1. Thomas Schipperges, *Prokofiev*, translated from German to English by J. M. Q. Davies, London, Haus Publishing, 2003, p. 75.
2. See Schipperges, p. 86.
3. Schipperges, p. 89.
4. Quoted by Schipperges from *Pravda*, 11 February 1948. *Ibidem*, p. 127.
5. Schipperges, p. 5.
6. See Schipperges, p. 48.
7. Sergei Prokofiev in *Musical Leader*, 19 December 1918, quoted by Thomas Schipperges, p. 74.
8. See S. Prokofiev, *Autobiografie. Însemnări-Articole* (translated from Russian to Romanian by N. Parocescu), Bucharest, Editura Muzicală, 1962, p. 27.
9. Cf. Schipperges, pp. 56-57.
10. Prokofiev, quoted by Schipperges, p. 57. See also Prokofiev, *Autobiografie. Însemnări-Articole*, p. 45-46.
11. Daniel Jaffé, *Sergey Prokofiev*, London, Phaidon, 1998, p. 104.
12. *Ibidem*.
13. Simon Morrison, *The People’s Artist. Prokofiev’s Soviet Years*, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 6.
14. Anatoly Lunacearsky, quoted by Morrison, p. 6-7.
15. See Schipperges, p. 79.
16. Daniel Jaffé, p. 118.
17. Published unsigned in *Proletarian Musician*, quoted by Daniel Jaffé, p. 118.
18. See Morrison, p. 11, 40-43.
19. Prokofiev, “Din amintirile despre A. M. Gorki,” in *Autobiografie. Însemnări-Articole*, p. 95.
20. See Morrison, p. 54.
21. Prokofiev, in “Inflorirea artei” (*Pravda*, 31 December 1937), *Autobiografie – Însemnări-Articole*, p. 100.
22. Israel Nestjewe, *Prokofjew. Der Künstler und sein Werk* (translated from Russian to German by Christa Schubert-Consbruch), Berlin, Henschelverlag, 1962, p. 290.
23. *Ibidem*.
24. Israel Nestjewe, p. 293.

25. See Morrison, p. 141.
26. Israel Nestyev, quoted by Th. Schipperges, p. 101.
27. See Schipperges, p. 101.
28. Morrison, p. 74.
29. Harlow Robinson, quoted by Th. Schipperges, p. 101.
30. Daniel Jaffé, p. 142.
31. Sergey Radlov, quoted by Morrison, p. 35.
32. See Daniel Jaffé, p. 135.
33. Prokofiev, in *Sovetskaya Muzyka* 12/1948, quoted by Thomas Schipperges, pp. 128-130.
34. Morrison, p. 354-355.
35. Samosud, quoted by Morrison, p. 373.
36. See Schipperges, p. 139.
37. See Mihail Bahtin, "Discursul în roman" (1934-1935), in *Probleme de literatură și estetică* (translated in Romanian by Nicolae Iliescu), Bucharest, Univers, 1982, p. 291.
38. Morrison, p. 115.
39. See Morrison, p. 117.
40. Morrison, p. 117.

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Abstract

Sergei Prokofiev: The Relationship between Music and Communist Ideology: Outline of a Typology

The Russian and Soviet composer Sergei Prokofiev was one of the greatest musicians of the XXth century. The present paper aims to investigate the ways in which Communist ideology influenced his the musical language, to analyse the complex interactions between Prokofiev's musical creation and ideology. I will take into consideration especially the context of the Soviet music from 1917 to 1953, Sergei Prokofiev's position in the Soviet world, and the typology of the music composed by Prokofiev.

Keywords

Sergei Prokofiev, URSS, contemporary period, music, ideology, social manipulation

