

SERGEI PROKOFIEV
Russian-Soviet composer (1891–1953)

Peter and the Wolf, Op. 67 (Estimated length: 28 minutes)

Classical music's most beloved and best-known music created for children has its roots in the stark 1930s Stalinist propaganda of the USSR. When Sergei Prokofiev accepted a commission in 1936 from Central Children's Theatre of Moscow Director, Natalya Sats, the narrative had already been chosen and written for him. The original story features Peter as a Young Pioneer – essentially a Soviet Boy Scout – who defies adult authority and emerges a hero. Prokofiev disliked the rhyming libretto provided for him and decided to write a new scenario. In Prokofiev's version, Peter confronts a wolf and manages to capture it alive. Prokofiev's tale also neatly fit into Stalinist principles: the older generation's myopic worldview (represented by the Grandfather) is fundamentally wrong, while Peter's courage and quick thinking are rewarded. Nonetheless, through subtle musical subversions of the standard Party message, Prokofiev's music also championed the importance of artistic freedom, especially in a totalitarian state.

The real genius behind *Peter and the Wolf* is the identification of each creature with particular instruments. The duck's melancholy oboe, the bird's shrill, flighty flute, the cat's stealthy clarinet, the wolf's scary horn chorale, Grandfather's rumbly-bumbly bassoon, and Peter's indefatigably cheerful string theme instantly imprint upon us each character's role and emotional disposition.

Even the best music can suffer from a poor performance. When Prokofiev led the premiere, Sats was ill and unable to provide the narration. "Attendance was rather poor and [it] failed to attract much attention," Prokofiev admitted to his diary. A month later, with a fully recovered Sats onstage at the Moscow Pioneers' Palace, *Peter* drew raves and cheers, as it has ever since.

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major, Op. 19 (Estimated length: 22 minutes)

In 1917, as WWI raged across Europe and political unrest in Russia grew, 26-year-old Sergei Prokofiev was having the most productive year of his compositional life; in addition to his first violin concerto, Prokofiev completed his Classical Symphony, the Third and Fourth piano sonatas and the *Visions fugitives* for piano. Prokofiev had returned to the St. Petersburg Conservatory when the war began, to avoid conscription in the Russian army; there he also began work on what would become his best-known piano concerto, No. 3.

Unfortunately for Prokofiev, the premiere of his Violin Concerto No. 1, which had been scheduled for November 1917, was canceled after the October Revolution swept across Russia. As a result, the Violin Concerto did not receive its premiere until 1923, in Paris. Prokofiev, apolitical by nature, was frustrated by the long delay.

A number of celebrated artists attended the premiere, including Pablo Picasso, composer Karol Szymanowski, dancer Anna Pavlova, pianist Artur Schnabel, and composition teacher Nadia Boulanger. Post-WWI Parisian audiences, who, according to musicologist Michael Steinberg "wanted their modern music to carry a certain shock value," scoffed at the concerto's lyricism and conventional format; composer Georges Auric's sneering description of the concerto as "Mendelssohnian" summed up the Parisian point of view. Prokofiev, however, had gone beyond the standard violin concerto format and put his own unique stamp on this time-honored musical genre. This violin concerto practiced was a type of musical subversion, full of subtle and not-so-

subtle surprises, which the Parisian audience clearly failed to appreciate. Audiences in Moscow, however, where the concerto was performed three days later in a version for violin and piano, received it with great enthusiasm.

Russian critic Israel Nestyev said he heard “the vibration of all the joy of living, all the love of sunshine and nature” in the Violin Concerto No. 1. The lyricism for which this music is rightly celebrated is a departure from the witty, ironic style we usually associate with Prokofiev. Still, Prokofiev’s darker side is not completely subsumed. Hungarian violinist Joseph Szigeti was intrigued by “its mixture of fairytale naiveté and daring savagery.” In fact, Szigeti was so taken by this concerto that he made it a personal mission to perform it at every opportunity, in the hopes of creating a permanent place for it in the orchestral repertoire.

The first and third movements live up to Nestyev’s characterization. In the Scherzo, however, Prokofiev utilizes every possible string technique to create tension and agitation. At the time, several of these techniques were new and daring, particularly spiccato (staccato bowing) and sul ponticello (bowing close to the bridge, which produces a buzzing, nasal tone). In combining the conventional virtuosity and lyrical melodies of a typical violin concerto with the in your face, avant-garde techniques of the Scherzo, Prokofiev expanded the very concept of the violin concerto.

Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 63 (Estimated length: 26 minutes)

Sergei Prokofiev was determined to make his second Violin Concerto “completely different from No. 1 in terms of both music and style.” Prokofiev also wanted the character of this second concerto to demonstrate that “lyrical thoughts preceded virtuosity;” he succeeded on both counts. The restless energy and contrasting moods of the concerto also reflect the composer’s peripatetic life at the time of its composition. As Prokofiev noted in his autobiography, “The main first movement theme was written in Paris, the main theme of the second movement in Voronezh [Russia], the orchestration was finished in Baku [Azerbaijan], and the premiere was in Madrid.” Under these circumstances, Prokofiev might have conceived his violin concerto as a musical travel diary, punctuated by musical nods to the different countries in which he wrote it. Instead, the Violin Concerto No. 2 serves as a musical farewell to the West, one of the last compositions Prokofiev wrote before he returned to live in the Soviet Union permanently. In this context, we can hear Prokofiev’s Second Violin Concerto as the composer’s last wholly un-self-censored work, music that displays his masterful ability to capture a whole spectrum of emotions: irony, wit, romantic intimacy, surprise, introspection.

The soloist opens with an unaccompanied melody, understated and somewhat melancholy; the contrast between this tune and the second theme, a relaxed, lyrical tune in which the soloist pairs with a solo horn and various winds, could not be more marked. Prokofiev was writing *Romeo and Juliet* at the same time as the second violin concerto, and this tender, starry-eyed theme would fit equally well into the ballet.

The romantic mood of *Romeo and Juliet* continues in the Andante assai, as the violin sings a love song of heartbreaking vulnerability. This theme carries through the movement, building upon layers of harmony and texture. Hearing it is akin to watching a red rose unfurl and bloom through the medium of time-lapse photography.

The vigor of the Allegro ben marcato marks a shift from the Andante. Punctuated by castanets and snare drum – no doubt included by Prokofiev as a nod to his Madrid audience – this bold,

dynamic music pulses with offbeat accents and Prokofiev's penchant for spiky, unexpected dissonances.

Suite from *Romeo and Juliet* (Estimated length: 37 minutes)

Sergei Prokofiev's musical version of Shakespeare's star-crossed lovers is some of the most evocative music associated with the story of Romeo and Juliet, but the music was originally mired in controversy. Commissioned by the Kirov Ballet in 1934, it was later rejected as "undanceable." Eventually, the Moscow Ballet contracted with Prokofiev to finish it.

Prokofiev's original storyline, which dared to script a happy ending in which Romeo finds Juliet alive, also provoked controversy. Prokofiev justified this shocking reversal with the very practical explanation that dead characters cannot dance, but pressure from critics and ballet administrators, as well as the observation that Prokofiev's music was essentially tragic in nature, persuaded the composer to use Shakespeare's ending. Prokofiev's original orchestration also caused problems for the dancers, who complained they were unable to hear it from the stage. Although Prokofiev grumbled to the dancers that "you want drums, not music!" he eventually complied with their request for a fuller sound.

Since Prokofiev had such trouble getting the full ballet of *Romeo and Juliet* performed, he decided to arrange two orchestral suites of music from the ballet, each with seven movements. In 1938, Prokofiev himself conducted both suites in a number of cities while on tour in Europe and the United States. The music was well received; one New York critic stated, "Prokofiev has written music for the masses and at the same time has attained extraordinary nobility." Of his music, Prokofiev said, "I have taken special pains to achieve a simplicity which will, I hope, reach the hearts of all listeners." The episodic nature of the music effectively captures the essence of both characters and narrative: the ominously foreboding *Dance of the Knights*; the lilting delicacy of Juliet's minuet; the ardent balcony scene, and the heartbreaking intensity of the strings during Romeo and Juliet's fateful goodbye.

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