

MODERN MUSIC

RUSSIA'S STRONG MAN

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THE recognition of Prokofieff by Western Europe still belongs to the future. In Russia he is more fortunate, for there he is held to be the dominating composer of his age, just as Scriabin was pre-eminent in his.

Prokofieff has not severed the strong ties that bind him to his country, its music and its activity. Stravinsky, on the other hand, holds the position of great Russian composer for Western Europe. Despite his brilliance and the racial folk element in his art, he looks at the music of his own land with the eyes of an alien. Prokofieff, the embodiment of instinctive power, is more deeply rooted in the soil than Stravinsky, the rationalist, who has conquered the world.

Measured by the most advanced standards, Prokofieff cannot be ranked as a modernist. Modern enough for Russia, he is considerably behind the latest fashions. He is always isolated, a stranger to all groups, schools, declarations. Since 1909, when he first became a public figure, impressionism and futurism have been succeeded by polytonality, atonality and other tendencies, yet Prokofieff remains exactly as we found him at the beginning of his career. Unresponsive to movements, his art is as naive as Schubert's, Chopin's or even Mozart's. He does not attempt to provoke inspiration by a cut-to-order doctrine, nor is he likely ever to go back to Bach, Handel, Gounod, or, in fact, anywhere but to Prokofieff.

To understand his place in Russia one must bear in mind the musical development of that country, which presents a curious reversal of the historical order in Western Europe. In Europe the classic style of the rococo was succeeded by the classic manner of Haydn and Mozart; then followed the romanticism of Beethoven, Schubert, Liszt and Wagner; this, yielding in turn to an impoverished form of the same romanticism in Grieg and to the impressionism of Debussy, was finally superseded by our modernity.

Russia, whose music may be said to date from the beginning of the nineteenth century, found the banquet of romanticism all prepared—but she refused the feast. All her composers from Glinka to the “mighty handful” were impressionists. It is only later, with Tchaikovsky and Scriabin, that we get the Russian form of romanticism. Concentrating in itself all the shortcomings of an already outworn movement, Scriabin’s belated and fiery expression of it brought on the inevitable reaction.

Prokofieff appears as a phase of the reaction of the absolute against an esthetics that had loaded music with philosophy, mysticism and literature. His native tendency was to bring music back to the world of pure sound, to draw it down from the infinite and intangible to nearer and familiar spheres.

The very foundations of his art were in opposition to romanticism and impressionism. Against vague and diffuse rhythms, deliberately inarticulate, he set up a cult of cheerful, concise rhythm, almost exaggerated in its neatness. For the current, arpeggio-ridden, drawing-room piano style, he substituted one both cutting and direct. Instead of blurred, mellifluous design he offered a sharp, leaping melodic line. Turning his back on tonal *beauté* and all its excesses, he sought to establish the rights of dissonance as such and not merely as a developed or improved consonance. He gave priority to form over color and abjured the current harmonic pre-occupation, finding himself instead in possession of a complete freedom and a contempt for harmony as such.

Prokofieff’s conception embodied the style of a new generation which was to succeed Scriabin. For he was not the only Russian to emphasize neoclassicism as a needed antidote. Nicolas

Medtner, who participated in building the new school, revealed the same graphic tendency, advocated a doctrine of design rather than color, and felt a similar aversion to drawing-room fashion. There was of course a great difference between the two composers, which accounts for Medtner's development into a musical recluse while Prokofieff is now winning world recognition. Medtner was fundamentally the apostle of a reaction, he wished simply to force music back to Schubert and Beethoven, but Prokofieff intuitively realized that in art a return is always a movement forward.



Prokofieff's characteristics appear in his earliest works and they do not change materially later. In this respect he is like Chopin, Schumann and Mendelssohn. He was born with a ready technique and manner, and his music at once captured the imagination. After the solemnities of the immediate past his naiveté, freedom from psychological obsession, fresh humor and healthy rhythmic verve were startling. He almost seemed to give music a fresh grant of laughter. This liberty, humor and mocking irreverence lent him an air of rowdyism, of *gaminerie*, which was accepted from the start as the expression of a youthful vigor.

But *gaminerie* is only the most obvious of his gifts, and not his sole or even chief distinction. His early works already reveal an occasional earnestness, a curious tenderness and power, overlooked in the first shock he gave the impressionists. An imperious composer, he always wrote without apologia or deference to public expectation. He foreshadowed the type, so unpalatable to many, of the New Man, the courageous, rude, new composer, who uses every means for the triumph of his genius, a type so different from the timid, proud, removed musician of the past.

Prokofieff is a representative of Young Russia. He is of the generation which created the revolution and brought about the downfall of the whole social structure.

There is a kinship with Beethoven in this young composer's boldness, in the roughness of his manner, in his laughter and mischief-making, in his contempt for prettiness and in the absence

of erotic expression. The wild and vigorous games of men are more to their taste than the lyric scenes of the drawing-room and its effeminate pleasures. Both are Spartan in spirit and their moments of unexpected tenderness have a quality that is particularly moving.

The parallel can be extended in some measure to their historical function. Each began as a simplifier of style. Beethoven eliminated the nice tonal trifles decorating the works of Haydn and Mozart; while Prokofieff set out to destroy the decadent ornaments of the later romantic school and smashed its perfume bottles. Their art, flourishing in the "cheerful and healthy air of nature" was destined to democratize. Music ceased to belong to the upper ten thousand; both men were children of revolution.

Another link is in their easy jest and irony. Of all musicians, the Russian of the past was the most solemn. He knew only the depths of mysticism or the heights of exaltation; pagan ecstasy or black pessimism. His objectivism overwhelmed him. He did not know how to play and so clowns performed his tricks while he stood aloof. Prokofieff is the first Russian who laughed in his music, and in this again is reminiscent of Beethoven.

I am not attempting to parallel the range and scope of the two composers, but making analogies only, and even they are limited. Despite all likenesses, the fundamental directions of Beethoven and Prokofieff are opposite. Beethoven's path leads from the classic to the romantic; Prokofieff goes the other way. The developing seed of Beethoven's music becomes the essential kernel of romanticism, while in Prokofieff that germ dies and his music turns back to classical, unburdened, tonal play. Prokofieff is, of course, a less titanic, less tragic figure. It is the relation of sunset to dawn. In Beethoven we feel the awakening of world perspectives; in Prokofieff they grow pale, fade and die out.



Compared to Scriabin's art and mystic outlook, Prokofieff's goal seems slight, provincial, "professionally musical." With him music abjures "omniscience" and asserts its own being. Once more it becomes autonomous and pure and forgets the mystic

sources of art. The musician's interest again limits the horizon; behind the sounds no one hears a "music of the spheres."

Prokofieff is one of those unrational artists for whom creation is almost wholly intuitive. He seems not to know what he is doing, yet he creates with faultless precision, a perfection which only instinct can achieve. It is difficult to be articulate about his style, obvious though his characteristics are. Scriabin's principles can be "explained" in words, while Prokofieff's defy them, not being in the least schematic.

Prokofieff's fertility, like Nature's, is simple and prodigal. It sometimes evokes an impression such as we get from Moussorgsky and Wagner, of a musical soil whose fecundity is inexhaustible. And yet, despite his rich endowment, his passion for even, square, rhythmic formulas often lends a certain monotony to his music.

In acerbity, wit and even manner, he resembles Scarlatti. Prokofieff feels his classicism and it is from a native impulse that he has restored to music the restraint of design. A certain eighteenth century hedonism survives in his spirit.

One cannot really analyze the evolution of so static a style, any more than one can Schumann's or Mendelssohn's. Prokofieff himself believes a composer creates only until his thirty-fifth year, and then begins to repeat. If this is true it can apply only to his special type. It is possible that Prokofieff's repetitions date even further back.

To return to his musical wit, I must reassert that I consider it one of his minor gifts. His ingenious *Sarcasms* have, it is true, contributed a new point of view to music that is further developed in some episodes of *The Three Oranges* and in his ballet, *Buffon*; his music here is more amusing, wicked, venomous and subtle than anyone else's. And yet it seems to me that this mocking aspect covers up something that is more essential. His spirit is almost completely possessed by a certain shame-facedness about emotion, a characteristic of youth or rather of adolescence,



Design for "Buffon"
by M. Larionov, used
at the Ballet Russe.



LARIONOV

PROKOFIEFF

DIAGHILEV

Sketched at a Ballet Russe rehearsal,
by MICHEL LARIONOV

Desperately shy of his own depth and tenderness, he masks his embarrassment with boldness and mockery. When the mask falls it reveals a chasteness, a restraint, the special aspect of the modern man whose spirit balks at the disclosure of his inner world.

Prokofieff means more to me in these unexpected flashes of austere tenderness than in his pranks. Such moments appear as oases in the pages of almost all his works—in the songs set to the poems of Balmont and of Akhmatova, in the *Fairy Tales of Old Grandma*, in certain parts of the *Violin Concerto*, in the theme with variations of the *Third Piano Concerto*, and in the profound adagio of the *Fourth Sonata*.

Among other contemporary composers his reputation seems to lack the peculiar glitter which makes their popularity so dazzling. He was one of the world's first pioneers in the return to design and classicism, which came into fashion much later. Prokofieff was writing in this, his characteristic manner, when Stravinsky was still a follower of impressionism. Hindemith is a German Prokofieff, tardier and less remarkable, for in Germany design and the classic tendency had never really died, while in Russia they had yet to be born. But Prokofieff never issued any manifestoes, and this is a handicap in an era which demands from every composer that he explain his system by a neat formula.

Prokofieff is an unconscious musical creator without realization of his own worth, function or even direction. Having achieved his style by instinct only, he occasionally drifts away from it. A classicist by nature and not by deliberate act he has sometimes slipped into impressionism and romanticism. In these lapses he reminds one of Tchaikovsky who was a similarly naive power, unaware of his destiny and so often lacking in style.

In Prokofieff, we find a mysterious and unrational force, inexplicable to us and to himself. And here perhaps is the reason for the boundless enthusiasm which greets him in Russia, where all volcanoes are not yet extinct nor the secrets of all the mysteries revealed. There, and not in the West which understands everything and is tired of it all, Prokofieff looms as the bright classicist, vigorous antidote to impressionism, author of music brilliant, full-blooded, profound and tender, the founder of a school, the creator of an epoch in art.