

## Teacher Notes on Russian Music and Composers

- Prokofiev gave up his popularity and wrote music to please Stalin. He wrote music to please the government.
- Stravinsky is known as the great inventor of Russian music.
- The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of great musical achievement in Russia. This was the time period in which “The Five” became known. They were:

Rimsky-Korsakov (most influential, 1844-1908)

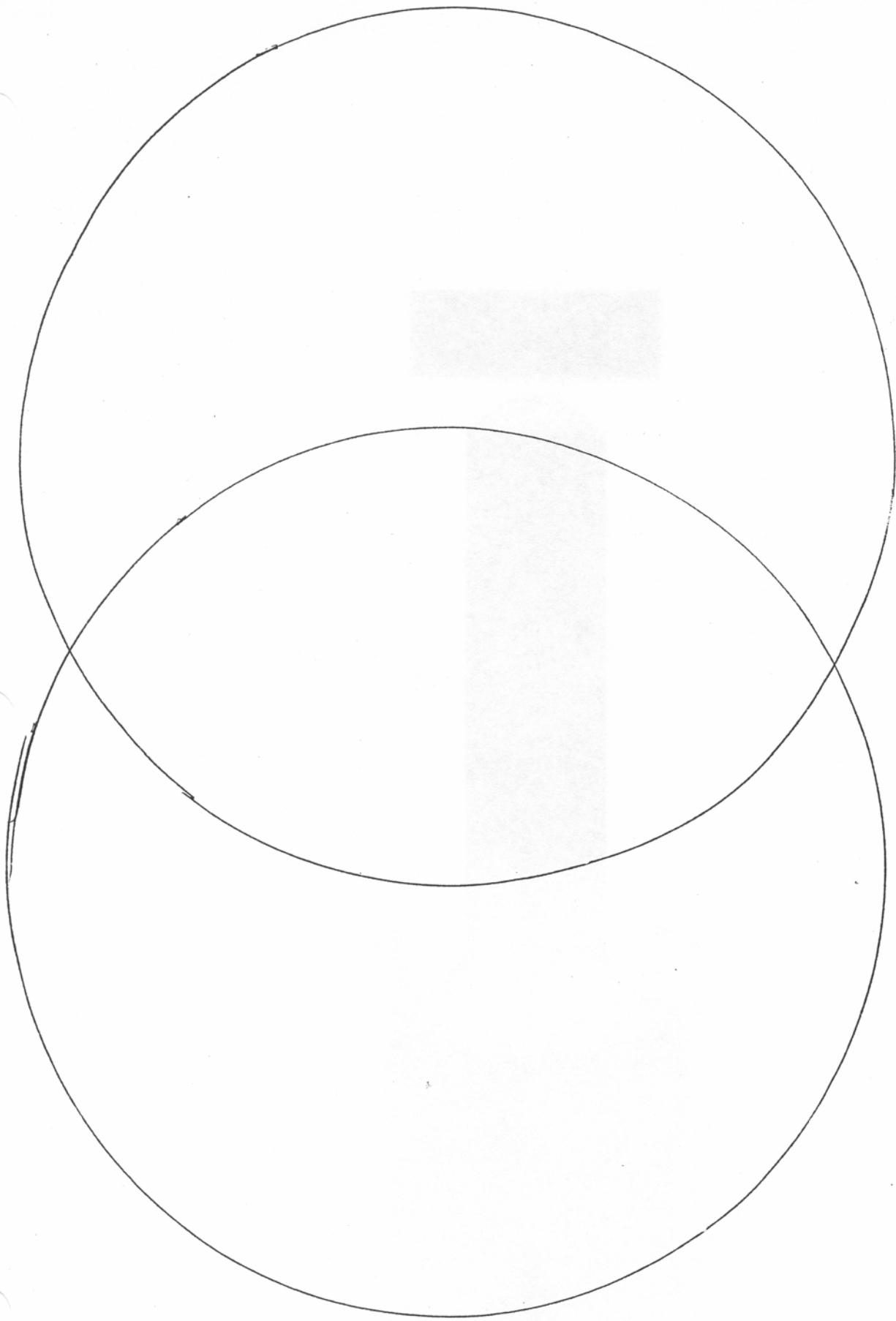
Borodin

Mussorgsky

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Balakirev

- Tchaikovsky (1840-'93) was not know as one of “The Five”.
- Near the end of the Stalinist Period Prokofiev and Shostakovich produced music so peasants could listen to it as they worked.
- During the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Russian music consisted of sacred vocal music or folk type songs.
- Peter the Great liked military music (such as the drums). He liked trumpet music, church bells and simple Polish music. He did not like French or Italian music. Nor did Peter the Great like opera.



## Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky (1882-1971)



Igor Stravinsky was born on June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, near St. Petersburg, Russia, he died on April 6, 1971, in New York City

He was Russian-born composer particularly renowned for such ballet scores as *The Firebird* (performed 1910), *Petrushka* (1911), *The Rite of Spring* (1913), and *Orpheus* (1947).

### *The Russian period*

Stravinsky's father, Fyodor Ignatyevich Stravinsky, was a bass singer of great distinction, who had made a successful operatic career for himself, first at Kiev and later in St. Petersburg. Igor was the third of a family of four boys. As a child he loved music. He was accustomed to hearing his father practicing his operatic roles at home. From an early age he attended opera and ballet performances at the neighboring Mariinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg. Regular piano lessons started when he was nine, and a little later he received training in harmony and counterpoint. Despite his obvious bent for music, his parents refused to allow him to pursue a musical career. Sent to St. Petersburg University to study criminal law and legal philosophy, he was graduated in 1905.

Meanwhile, his musical interests had turned to composition. In the summer of 1902, a few months before his father's death, he obtained an introduction to the Russian composer Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov through one of Rimsky-Korsakov's sons, who was also a student at the university. Rimsky-Korsakov was sufficiently interested in the young man's early attempts at composition to advise him not to enter the conservatory for academic training but to pursue his studies privately. This advice was followed. A year later Rimsky-Korsakov agreed to tutor him privately, mainly in instrumentation. The arrangement continued for about three years (1903-1906). It was Stravinsky's habit to discuss his compositions with his mentor as they were planned and written. Rimsky-Korsakov arranged for several of these, including the *Symphony in E Flat Major* (1905-1907), to be performed at private or public concerts in St. Petersburg. The last composition to be presented in this way was *Fireworks* (1908), a brief symphonic poem that Stravinsky intended as a wedding present for Rimsky-Korsakov's daughter. Rimsky-Korsakov died in the summer of 1908, before it could be performed. After his death the mourning pupil wrote a funeral dirge (1908) in memory of his master. It was performed in St. Petersburg the following season; the score is lost.

Stravinsky left the university in 1905. The following year he married his first cousin, Catherine Nossenko. They lived in two rooms of his family's apartment in St. Petersburg and spent their summers in the country at Ustilug in Volhynia, an area of Ukraine. A son (Theodore) was born to them in 1907 and a daughter (Ludmila) a year later.

## *His Collaboration with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*

When Fireworks and earlier orchestral piece, Scherzo Fantastique (1907-08), were performed in St. Petersburg on Feb. 6, 1909, they were heard by the impresario Sergey Diaghilev, who was then busy making preliminary arrangements for the summer season of his Ballets Russes to be held in Paris. He was so favorably impressed by Stravinsky's promise as a composer that he invited him to join his small group of artistic collaborators. For the 1909 ballet season Stravinsky was invited to orchestrate various pieces of ballet music, including two piano numbers by Frédéric Chopin for *Les Sylphides*. For the 1910 season, Diaghilev commissioned from him a new ballet score, *The Firebirds*

The next few years were a period of intensely close collaboration between the two men, for Diaghilev was anxious that all of Stravinsky's major new works should be mounted by his company. After the decisive success of *The Firebird* at the Paris Opéra (June 25, 1910), Stravinsky started to write a *Konzertstück* ("concertpiece") for piano and orchestra; but, yielding to Diaghilev's arguments, he agreed to adapt the music he had already written to fit a new ballet scenario, and this work, *Petrushka*, received its first performance during the Ballets Russes 1911 season in Paris. Before this, Stravinsky had had the idea of writing a kind of primitive spring symphony to be called *Great Sacrifice*; here, too, Diaghilev persuaded him that it should be cast in the form of a ballet. The composition of *The Rite of Spring* (as it was finally called) was spread over two years (1911-13). The music of this dynamic score created a major scandal when the ballet had its first performance at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées, Paris (May 29, 1913). Stravinsky then reverted to the task of finishing a short opera based on the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen's tale "The Nightingale," which he had started in 1908-09 but which had been interrupted by the commission of *The Firebird*. This opera was now requested by the Moscow Free Theatre, but when that new venture suddenly collapsed, Diaghilev saw his chance and, taking over the work, arranged for it to be produced as part of the Ballets Russes seasons in Paris and London in the summer of 1914.

That summer also marked the conception of a new ballet cantata to be called *The Wedding*, which Stravinsky decided to base on Russian peasant themes and customs. Had World War I not intervened, this new score might have been ready for production by The Ballets Russes in 1915 or 1916. Although the actual composition was completed by 1917, the final form of the instrumentation was not decided until 1923.

Igor Stravinsky's close connection with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes meant that during the five years 1910-14 he spent considerable part of his time outside Russia. He was usually in Paris for the company's summer seasons and occasionally followed them on tour to Rome, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, and London. He still managed to spend part of each summer in his Russian country home at Ustilug, the quiet atmosphere of which he found conducive to composition. His visits to St. Petersburg, however, became increasingly rare. The health of his family was precarious, and a tendency to tuberculosis made the climate of Switzerland attractive. His second son (Soulima) was born at Lausanne, Swiss in 1910, his second daughter (Milena) at Leysin in 1914. Parts of *The Rite of Spring* and *The Nightingale* were written at Clarens, Swiss in the

intervening years, and the war years were spent entirely in Switzerland, first at Clarens and later at Morges.

### *The Years of exile*

These were years of isolation that ultimately led to years of exile, for as the war progressed, Stravinsky became cut off, not only from Russia but also from the Ballets Russes - the European engagements of which had to be abandoned and replaced by an American tour - and from his music publishers, who had their headquarters in Berlin. He tried to overcome these difficulties in various ways. He found a local publisher in Geneva for many of his wartime compositions. In collaboration with the Swiss novelist Charles Ferdinand Ramuz he created *The Soldier's Tale* (1918), an entertainment "to be read, played, and danced" that was intended to be played on tour by a small traveling theatre. The project collapsed after a successful first performance in Lausanne, owing to a sudden epidemic of Spanish influenza.

### *The French period*

As soon as the war was over, Stravinsky decided to move from Switzerland and settle in France; during the next 20 years (1920-39) he lived in various places there - Biarritz, Nice, Voreppe, and Paris. These years were marked by an important change in his music - the abandonment of the Russian features of his earlier style and the adaptation of a neoclassical idiom. Such a radical change cost him a great effort and only after several years of what he called "samplings, experiments, and amalgamations" did he find his way to new works such as *Oedipus Rex* (1927) and the *Symphony of Psalms* (1930), capable of holding their own against the best of his earlier works.

In the early postwar years, Stravinsky's ties with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes were renewed. They were now on a much looser basis, however, than in the prewar years, for he saw that in the case of itinerant company, without a firm base, there could be no guarantee of permanence. The only new ballet commissioned by Diaghilev from Stravinsky was *Pulcinella* (1920), the score of which consisted of music by Giovanni Battista Pergolesi that was arranged by Stravinsky and adapted to a Neapolitan commedia dell'arte scenario. *Apollo Musagetes* (1928) was the last new ballet of his to be mounted by the Ballets Russes. The following year (1929) Diaghilev died, and his ballet company folded.

The need to build up his income as a result of the loss of his private property in Russia had led to Stravinsky's embarking on subsidiary careers as concert pianist and conductor. Some of his new works - such as the *Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments* (1923-24), *Sonata for piano* (1924), *Serenade in A Major for piano* (1925), *Capriccio for piano and orchestra* (1929), and *Concerto for Two Solo Pianos* (1935) - were written primarily for himself as soloist. A considerable part of each year was devoted to touring, as either solo performer or conductor. Most of these tours were in Europe. He also made three visits in North America in 1925, 1935,

and 1937 and on to South America in 1936.

Stravinsky's composition of ballet scores did not come to an end with Diaghilev's death. In the late 1920s, the Russian dancer Ida Rubinstein assembled a company of her own and commissioned two ballet scores from Stravinsky - *The Fairy's Kiss* (1928) and *Persephone* (1934). The former was based on a selection of the piano and vocal music of the Romantic Russian composer Peter Ilich Tchaikovsky. The latter was a setting of a poem by the 20th-century French writer André Gide as a melodrama with song and speech, dance, and mime. For the then recently founded American Ballet he wrote *The Card Party* (1937).

The years 1938 and 1939 were marked by a succession of family bereavements. In the autumn of 1938 his elder daughter died of tuberculosis. The deaths of his wife and mother followed in March and in June 1939.

### *The American period*

The outbreak of World War II led to a completely new orientation of his life. An invitation from Harvard University to deliver the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures during the 1939-40 academic years gave him the opportunity to leave Europe and settle in the United States. Early in 1940 he married the artist Vera de Bosset, whom he had known for many years. When the lectures at Harvard on the poetics of music had been given, the Stravinskys traveled to California and acquired a house in Hollywood, where they were to live for more than a quarter of a century.

During the war years, two important symphonic works were composed - the *Symphony in C Major* (1938-40) and *Symphony in Three Movements* (1942-45). Whereas the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920) display an original and ingenious treatment of typical musical material from his Russian period on symphonic lines, the *Symphony in C Major* represents a summation of neoclassical principles in symphonic form, and the *Symphony in Three Movements* successfully combines the essential features of the concerto with those of the symphony.

During the years 1948-51 he worked on *The Rake's Progress*, a full-length, neoclassical opera with a libretto by the Anglo-American poet W.H. Auden and the U.S. writer Chester Kallman. When it was finished, Stravinsky returned to Europe for the first time since 1939 and conducted the first performance of the work at the Teatro la Fenice in Venice. While he was working on this score, he invited a young U.S. musician, Robert Craft, to help him with certain musical tasks at his home in Hollywood. The visit was a success, and Craft eventually became established in the Stravinsky household as a friend, consultant, and musical assistant. This was a particularly important moment in Stravinsky's musical development because after the composition of *The Rake's Progress* he felt he had outgrown "the special incubator" in which the works of his neoclassical period had gestated. Craft's natural liking for serial music stimulated Stravinsky into examining carefully the music of the Austrian composer Anton von Webern and also some of the works of the Austrians Arnold Schoenberg and Alban Berg, with which he was not very familiar at that time. His interest was aroused and he found his own idiom becoming profoundly affected.

To begin with, his serial essays were cautious experiments carried out within a framework of tonal music, featuring note rows and procedures involving inversion, retrogression, and retrograde inversion. The Canticum Sacrum (1955) and the ballet Agon (1953-57) were larger scale works, in which the music traveled from a modal and tonal beginning into a fully serial score, reverting at the end to the modal and tonal music of the beginning. The first of his fully serial compositions was Threni (1958); this was followed by Movements (1959), Variations (1964), and Requiem Canticles (1966), which occupy just as honored a place in his output as the masterpieces of his Russian and Neoclassical periods. It is a characteristic of these serial works that in comparison they are much briefer than the composer's tonal works but seem to have a much greater musical specific gravity.

*A*fter the Requiem Canticles, ill health caused a slowing down of Stravinsky's compositional activity, but even as late as 1970 he was working on instrumental transcriptions of some of Bach's preludes and fugues. He was buried in Venice on the island of San Michele.

### *His Contribution to music*

*S*travinsky's special contribution to music in the 20th century was wide and varied. He never seemed to start a composition with preconceived ideas but always examined his raw material with a fresh and critical ear. He was not prepared to accept established practice about development but preferred to subject his musical material to a personal system of tests. This had particularly interesting results whenever time, metre, and dynamics were concerned.

*S*travinsky explored with zest the asymmetrical patterns of compound metres and, by using devices of prolongation and elision, broke down the tradition of symmetrical phrasing. He was meticulous about degrees of articulation and emphasis. He restored to music the sense of healthy, unwavering pulse, and this helped to make so many of his compositions suitable for dancing. His music made a "clean" sound - there was no filling in merely for the sake of filling in - and, after his symphonic poem The Song of the Nightingale (1917), his orchestral practice became mainly a question of using concertante groups of instruments with plenty of breathing space around them. He never worked to an instrumental formula, but every work, regardless of idiom, had a different instrumental specification and a different sound.

### *Stravinsky's most important works:*

- Apollo (ballet)
- Concerto "Dumbarton Oaks"
- Firebird (ballet suite)
- l'Histoire du soldat: Suite
- Petrouchka (ballet)
- Sacre du printemps
- Symphony in C
- Symphony of Psalms

[http://www.maurice-abravanel.com/more\\_stravinsky.html](http://www.maurice-abravanel.com/more_stravinsky.html)

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## TIMELINE



## SUMMARY

Born on 23-April-1891 (11-April-1891 old style) in Sontsovka, Ukraine of the former Russian Empire, Sergei Sergeevich Prokofiev is considered one of the greatest composers of the twentieth century. He was also an accomplished pianist and conductor. He attended the St. Petersburg Conservatory from 1904 to 1914, winning the Anton Rubinstein prize for best student pianist when he graduated. Like other great composers he mastered a wide range of musical genres, including

symphonies, concerti, film music, operas, ballets, and program pieces. At the time, his works were considered both ultra-modern and innovative. He traveled widely, spending many years in London and Paris, and toured the United States five times. He gained wide notoriety and his music was both reviled and triumphed by the musical press of the time. He returned to his homeland permanently in 1936. He died on 05-March-1953 in Moscow.

## CHILDHOOD (1891-1904)



Church in Sontsovka. [\[link\]](#)

Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev was born on Wednesday 23-April in the year 1891. The date of his birth according to the 'old style' Julian calendar is 11-April. The calendar was changed in 1918 when the newly formed Soviet Union adopted the Gregorian calendar used by the rest of the world. Sergei was born in the farming village of Sontsovka in what is now the Ukraine, and what was then part of the Russian Empire. His father Sergei Alekseevich Prokofiev was an agricultural engineer, and his mother Maria Grigoryevna Prokofieva (born Zhitkova) was a well-educated woman with a keen musical sense and piano skills to match. She was to be the most important influence in young Sergei's musical development.

By all accounts, young Sergei had an idyllic childhood -- spoiled by loving, doting parents who had twice earlier tried to have children (two daughters died early in infancy.) Sergei spent his first thirteen years in Sontsovka, enjoying the privileges of living in the manor house on a large farming estate, treated like gentry even though his father was merely the estate manager.

Although Sontsovka was located far from the cultural centers of Moscow and St. Petersburg, young Sergei was not isolated from music. In his memoirs, he wrote of his childhood:

When I was put to bed at night, I never wanted to sleep. I would lie there and listen as the sound of a Beethoven sonata came from somewhere far off, several rooms away. More than anything else, my mother played the sonatas of Volume I.

Next came Chopin's preludes, mazurkas, and waltzes. Sometimes there was a piece by Liszt -- something not too difficult. Her favorite Russian composers were Tchaikovsky and Rubinstein. Anton Rubinstein was at the height of his fame, and my mother was convinced that he was a greater phenomenon than Tchaikovsky. A portrait of Rubinstein hung over the grand piano.

The seeds of his musical genius had been sown. The piano would remain at the core of his musical soul throughout his life.

Sergei was a precocious child, although not a prodigy on the level of Mozart. Prokofiev's mother taught him to play the piano and by age five he had written his first composition -- a tune which his

mother helped to transcribe as "Indian Galop." Far from immature musical ramblings, Prokofiev's early piano compositions revealed a mature understanding of established musical forms, imprinted with hints of harmonic and rhythmic innovations which would characterize his later style. In fact, he meticulously collected these works, which he called his "little puppies", into notebooks that he would use many times later in life. His mother nurtured his piano skills although she never forced him to study. She did not begin formal music lessons with Sergei until he was seven, preferring instead to let him discover music on his own. In fact, Prokofiev's parents focused most of his educational energies on non-musical subjects, particularly mathematics and the sciences. Thus it is not without surprise that the young Prokofiev took a liking to the game of chess. He taught himself the rules of the game by age seven. Much like music, chess was a passion which was to remain with Prokofiev throughout his life.



Sergei at the piano with his opera "The Giant." [\[link\]](#)

Although Sontsovka was isolated far from major cities, Maria Grigoryevna usually travelled at least once a year to visit family in St. Petersburg. She also recognized the importance of exposing young Sergei to the cultural offerings of Moscow and St. Petersburg. Sergei did not accompany his mother on the long trips to the major Russian cities until he was eight. Sergei's first big-city trip occurred in 1900 when he accompanied his mother to Moscow. There he saw two operas, Charles Gounod's *Faust* and Alexander Borodin's *Prince Igor*. Both performances had a profound effect on Prokofiev. As soon as he returned to Sontsovka, he set about writing his own opera, which he called "The Giant." Sergei wrote both the libretto and music, 'staging' a production of the work with family members and friends in 1901.

Recognizing her son's prodigious musical talent and her limitations as a music teacher, Maria Grigoryevna decided her son needed better instruction. In December of 1901, Maria and Sergei senior took their son back to Moscow, stopping first in St. Petersburg. In Moscow, Maria arranged a meeting with Yuri Nikolayevich Pomerantsev, a friend of the family who was then studying at the Moscow Conservatory. Pomerantsev recognized the ten-year old's potential and arranged an audition for Sergei in front of the famous Moscow professor and composer Sergei Ivanovich Taneyev. Taneyev was impressed enough to convince another music teacher from Moscow to travel to Sontskova in the summer of 1902 to teach Sergei. The teacher was Reinhold Moritsevich Gliere (1875-1956), a young, but accomplished composer and capable pianist. Gliere immediately took to the eleven year old Sergei and the lessons were roundly successful. Gliere returned again in the summer of 1903 to teach Sergei. By then, Sergei had composed another opera, a four-movement symphony with Gliere's help, and about 70 small piano pieces.

By this time in his young life, Prokofiev recognized his future lay in music. He was self-assured and had developed a confident stage presence, forged from frequent recitals and performances in front of friends, family, and the Sontsovka staff. In spite of a disciplined upbringing by his father and mother, Sergei still possessed a

mischievous and playful streak -- his love of fairy tales and youthful innocence would show in his music throughout his life.

The year was 1904, Prokofiev was thirteen, and it was clear to Maria Grigoryevna that the geographical isolation of Sontsovka was not conducive to the development of her son's burgeoning musical potential. Much to the lament of his father who stayed behind in Sontsovka, Maria and Sergei moved to St. Petersburg in the spring of 1904.



## ENFANT TERRIBLE: THE CONSERVATORY YEARS (1904-1914)



St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1912.  
[\[link\]](#)

Now thirteen years old, Prokofiev began his formal musical training in St. Petersburg. Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936), noted Russian composer and professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, heard Sergei and suggested he apply. Gliere helped him prepare and in September 1904, Prokofiev took the Conservatory entrance examination. In his memoirs, Prokofiev wrote:

The entrance examination was quite sensational. The examinee before me was a man with a beard who had nothing to show the examiners but a single romance without accompaniment. Then I came in, bending under the weight of two huge folders containing four operas, two sonatas, a symphony and a good many pianoforte pieces. 'Here is a pupil after my own heart!' observed Rimsky-Korsakov, who headed the examining board. Prokofiev was accepted -- the youngest student ever to be admitted. He was a young boy in the greatest musical conservatory in Russia amongst men and women twice his age. His most well-known teachers in the Conservatory, Glazunov, Rimsky-Korsakov and Anatol Liadov, were respected, if not erudite, composers stuck in the shadow of the earlier Russian greats Mikhail Glinka (1803-1857) and Modest Mussorgsky (1839-1891). Prokofiev strove to develop his own style -- his memoirs indicate that even in his early Conservatory years he was self-confident, generally critical of his fellow students, yet disapproving of criticism he often received from his teachers. His unflinching belief in his own innovative musical style and his criticism of fellow students was interpreted as arrogance by many around him. This arrogance and propensity to shock his teachers with his music earned him the reputation as an 'enfant terrible' -- a label Prokofiev actually enjoyed.

In 1906, Prokofiev met Nikolai Miaskovsky, another student in the Conservatory who was ten years his elder. A seemingly unlikely match, they quickly became best friends -- bonded by an intense interest in new music. Bored and disenchanted with the music of the Russian standard-bearers Glazunov and Glinka, whom their teachers championed, Miaskovsky and Prokofiev drew inspiration instead from composers such as Max Reger and Alexander Scriabin. Miaskovsky and Prokofiev would remain friends until Miaskovsky's death over forty years later. They attended concerts, played duets, and more importantly, tried out their new compositions on each other. Miaskovsky was vital in providing

support and critical advice to Prokofiev. Sergei was by now a prolific composer -- drawing extensively from the notebooks he so meticulously maintained during his youth.

At the same time, Prokofiev was also developing a formidable piano technique. He played his first public performance on 18-December-1908 in St. Petersburg at one of the 'Evenings of Contemporary Music.' These weekly concerts were disorganized affairs in appearance, but critically important in the avant-garde of musical Europe. Most of the city's leading composers, musicians and music critics attended the concerts. The list of composers who played at the series is a veritable 'Who's Who' of contemporary Russian music at the time -- Prokofiev, Stravinsky, and Miaskovsky. At his debut performance, Prokofiev performed his own compositions, most notably four pieces which were later to be published as [Opus 4: Reminiscence, Elan, Despair and Diabolic Suggestions](#). The performance was a rousing success. Critics and composers from around Europe took note.

Prokofiev continued to play at the 'Evenings of Contemporary Music,' as well as continuing to frustrate his teachers in the Conservatory. He received only passing marks in composition. While his music was undoubtedly too advanced at the time for most of his composition and music theory professors, he at least caught the eye of his piano and conducting teachers. In 1909, Glazunov wrote of one of Prokofiev's examinations:

Technical preparation exceedingly brilliant. Interpretation unique, original, but not always in the best artist taste... Prokofiev completed his composition courses in 1909 to disapproving reviews by his teachers, but he was invited back to take courses in piano and conducting. He studied piano under Anna Esipova and Nikolai Tcherepnin from 1909 to 1914. Undaunted by the criticism from his professors, Prokofiev continued to write music on his own. During this time his works are characterized by continued brilliance at the piano (e.g. Piano Concertos [No. 1](#) & [2](#), [Toccata Op. 11 in D Minor](#)), and a struggle to master new forms (the one-act opera [Maddalena](#), and several sketches for Orchestra including [Autumnal](#) and [Dreams](#)).

While the poor reception accorded his early orchestral works in this period ([Dreams](#), [Autumnal](#), and [Maddalena](#)) temporarily tarnished the luster on his rising star, he took the criticism in stride. Prokofiev's darkest days in this period followed the death of his father in 1910. Although he had left Sontsovka when he was five, he regularly corresponded with his father and returned home during the summers.

It was perhaps this confluence of events that inspired him to re-establish his reputation as a formidable composer-pianist. The vehicle for him to do this was his first Piano Concerto. He later called it his "first more or less mature composition as regards to conception and

fulfillment." He premiered the work on 07-August-1912 at a summer concert in Sokolniki, a suburb of Moscow. The public reaction was positive, the critical reaction scathing. When the composer premiered the work in the United States six years later, New York Times music critic James Gibbons Huneker shredded the work:

The First Piano Concerto of Prokofiev was in one movement, but compounded of many rhythms and recondite noises...The first descending figure -- it is hardly a theme -- is persistently affirmed in various nontonalities by the orchestra, the piano all the while shrieking, groaning, howling, fighting back, and in several instances it seemed to rear and bite the hand that chastised it...There were moments when the piano and orchestra made sounds that evoked not only the downfall of empires, but also of fine crockery, the fragments flying in all directions. He may be the Cossack Chopin for the next generation -- this tall, calm young man. The diabolic smiles press upon you as his huge hands, the hands of a musical primate, tear up trees and plow the soil. That fetching, old expression, 'Hell to pay and no pitch hot,' applies to Prokofiev: only he owns his Hades and has the necessary pitch in abundance.

In contrast to other composers such as Rachmaninov and Tchaikovsky who wilted under critical assaults, Prokofiev welcomed the disapproving reviews. Throughout his career, in fact he would purposely push the limits of his compositions, all the while provoking and shocking listeners and critics. He relished his role as 'enfant terrible' of the music world.

He completed his Second Piano Concerto in 1912, and its premiere in Pavlosk on 05-September caused even more of an uproar than did the First. Music critic N. Bernstein called the work:

a cacophony of sounds that has nothing in common with civilized music...Prokofiev's cadenzas, for example, are unbearable. They are such a musical mess that one might think they were created by capriciously emptying an inkwell on the paper.

Prokofiev entered his tenth and last term in the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1913 at age 22. His teachers had long abandoned any hope of making a 'proper' composer of him. Liberated from the short-sightedness of his composition teachers, Prokofiev eyed instead the one goal that he could still attain in the Conservatory -- the coveted Anton Rubinstein Prize awarded to the best student pianist. Knowing the risk it entailed, Prokofiev again stirred the waters by daring to perform his own work. He chose to play his First Piano Concerto, thinking the Second would be "too outlandish within the Conservatoire walls." Prokofiev recalled the final examination recital:

At my request, Jurgenson printed the piano score of the First Concerto in time for the examination. I bought 20 copies and distributed them to the examiners. When I came out on the stage the first thing I saw was my concerto spread out on 20 laps -- an unforgettable sight for a composer who has just begun to appear in print! My most serious competitor was Golubovskaya...a very subtle and intelligent pianist. We were extremely gallant and courteous to each other: on the eve of

the examination we inquired after the condition of each other's fingers, and in the long hours of suspense while the judges were deciding our fate, we played chess. After a long and stormy session the prize was awarded to me...

It was vintage Prokofiev -- to hell with tradition. He would do it his way and he would succeed. Thus ended a tumultuous, but ultimately triumphant ten years in the St. Petersburg Conservatory.



## EXPLORATION AND REVOLUTION (1914-1918)

Following his graduation from the Conservatory, Prokofiev took little note of the momentous changes afoot in his native Russia. World War I had just broken out and Russia had launched a daring (but ultimately disastrous) invasion into East Prussia. A Russian invasion of the European musical world had also begun. Fellow countryman and composer Igor Stravinsky had caused something of a furor with the premiere of his ballets *The Firebird* and *Petrouchka*. Sergei Diaghilev, the famous Russian ballet impresario and Stravinsky's partner, had also launched his Ballet Russes in Paris in 1909 to enormous success. Prokofiev was eager to be in the thick of it.

Thus he set off for the West in June 1914 to learn more about the successes of the Ballet Russes, Stravinsky, and others, and to make a name for himself. He met Diaghilev in London in 1914 and played his Second Piano Concerto for him. Diaghilev was so impressed, he toyed with the notion of staging a performance to the Concerto. Although he finally rejected the idea, he did ask Prokofiev to write a ballet based on Russian themes.

Diaghilev had a close relationship to Stravinsky, of which Prokofiev came to be envious. At the time, Stravinsky was at the forefront of the contemporary music movement and Prokofiev desperately wanted to share the spotlight. The tremors caused by *The Firebird* and *Petrouchka* were minor compared to the tumultuous premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913. At the premiere in Paris a riot broke out in the theater and spilled onto the streets. Prokofiev felt the temblor. He hoped to cause an even bigger stir with the premiere of his Diaghilev-commissioned ballet [Ala and Lolli](#). In his memoirs, Prokofiev acknowledged "it is quite possible that I was now searching for the same images in my own way." In 1914-15 Sergei concentrated his composing efforts on the score. Although he performed several times as a pianist and composed the character piece '[The Ugly Duckling](#)' for voice and piano, he focused most of his energy on the ballet. Unfortunately, when Prokofiev showed Diaghilev the unfinished score, Diaghilev rejected it. Some debate has continued as to just why Diaghilev turned it down -- musically *Ala and Lolli* was not as dissonant as *The Rite of Spring*. It seems likely that Diaghilev did not want a repeat of *The Rite of Spring* debacle and simply lost his nerve. It is certain that he had at least some confidence in Prokofiev's composing ability because as fast as he rejected *Ala and Lolli*, he commissioned Prokofiev to write another ballet.

Rattled but not defeated, Prokofiev began composing his second ballet,

["Chout"](#) (also known as "The Tale of the Buffoon"). However, he thought *Ala and Lolli* "was well worth saving", so he reworked the ballet score into an orchestral suite in four movements, which he renamed ["The Scythian Suite."](#) To simply throw away two years of effort was unacceptable. He premiered the work on 29-January-1916 in St. Petersburg. He was hoping to eclipse Stravinsky's riotous *Rite of Spring* premiere:

The concert is going to take place. Do you know that the price of rotten eggs and apples has gone up in St. Petersburg? That's what they'll throw at me!

Although a riot did not occur, the premiere of *The Scythian Suite* was a spectacular disaster. Even the progressive Russian music critics panned it. The French and American press were still less kind. A reviewer in "Musical America" wrote:

Crashing Siberias, volcano hell, Krakatoa, sea-bottom crawlers. Incomprehensible? So is Prokofiev. A splendid tribute was paid to his Scythian Suite in Petrograd by Glazunov. The poor tortured classicist walked out of the hall during the performance of the work. No one walked out of Aeolian Hall, but several respectable pianists ran out. Glazunov had indeed stamped out during the performance. But Prokofiev was nonplussed. As much as the critics and classicists hated it, most of the public loved it. He had developed a fervent following among avant garde listeners ever since the days of his piano performances at the 'Evenings of Contemporary Music', and they cheered wildly for their hometown hero at the conclusion of *Scythian Suite's* premiere.

The spectacle now over, Prokofiev had to deal with the aftermath. "Chout" was put on the back burner by Diaghilev. Brushed aside by Diaghilev a second time, Prokofiev turned instead to an opera he had been commissioned to write in 1915 by the Maryinsky Theater. ["The Gambler,"](#) based on the story by Dostoevsky, consumed most of Prokofiev's composing energies in 1916 and 1917. Along the way, he also composed the brilliant [Visions Fugitives](#) for piano, while managing to alienate Rachmaninov and Medtner. It was vintage Prokofiev -- his burning drive to surpass his peers inevitably got the better of him in public. A similar petty incident would complicate his friendship with Stravinsky in 1933.

1917 was a momentous year in Russia, as it was in Prokofiev's life. Czar Nicholas II was overthrown in March 1917 ending Imperial Russian rule forever. The Provisional Government didn't last long. Prokofiev's home town of St. Petersburg was renamed Petrograd and became the hotbed of a brewing Bolshevik revolution. The Great October Revolution later that year saw the overthrow of the interim government and the triumph of Marxist Leninism. Russia became the leading state in the new Soviet Union and thereafter followed five years of civil war. Petrograd was a battleground for most of 1917 -- hardly the place for a composer looking for a quiet place to write. As a result, Prokofiev spent nine months of 1917 living in the Caucasus. Despite being isolated from Petrograd, 1917 proved enormously

productive for Prokofiev. The staging of "The Gambler" had been interrupted by war, but during the year he completed revisions of the [Third](#) and [Fourth Piano Sonatas](#), he completed the [Violin Concerto No. 1](#) and the [Classical Symphony \(No. 1\)](#), and he began writing the choral work "[Seven, They are Seven](#)" and the [Piano Concerto No. 3](#). This is an especially impressive streak given he didn't have his piano with him during much of the time. He returned to Petrograd in the Spring of 1918, where he premiered the 'Classical Symphony.' Unlike recent premieres, the work was warmly accepted, even by the new Soviets who had seized all vestiges of power, cultural and social as well as economic and political.

The Bolshevik takeover in 1917 was a watershed event for most artists in the former Russia. While on the one hand most artists, musicians and composers became part of the privileged class in Soviet society, they lost all artistic freedom. Music could be neither published nor performed without official authorization. Given many of the composers and musicians had allied themselves with the Whites during the Revolution, it is understandable that many fled the country. Foremost among the early emigres was Stravinsky, who left Russia for the West in 1914. Prokofiev, on the other hand, was less ideologically opposed to the Bolsheviks and preferred to walk a fine line between staying in good graces with them, and continuing his musical development in the West. Weighing more heavily in his decision to leave were the deteriorating living conditions in the Soviet Union. World War I was still raging, a new Civil War between Reds and Whites had erupted, old enemies seized upon the opportunity to settle old scores (e.g. Poland invaded the Ukraine) and drastic new Communist economic policies plunged the country into famine. These were tough times for a young composer coming into his own. Prokofiev knew his prospects were much brighter in Western Europe. Blocked from heading west by war, Prokofiev headed east instead, toward the Pacific port of Vladivostock. It was May 1918 and the beginning of long travels abroad.



## AMERICA AND EUROPE (1918-1932)

Prokofiev left Vladivostok in May 1918 and stopped for a brief visit in Japan. Although generally unfamiliar with Western Music, the Japanese knew enough of Prokofiev to ask him to play several recitals in Tokyo and Yokohama. These completed, he boarded a ship for the United States, stopping briefly in Hawaii. He arrived in San Francisco in August 1918. He was broke. He borrowed \$300 to travel to New York, where he arrived in September. His name more renowned than in Japan, he was soon asked to play a recital. This he did on 20-November-1918. The reception was both sensational yet inauspicious -- critics railed against his "savage" music and "steely, mechanistic" playing, while many in the listening public were delighted. Also impressed were music producers -- at their request he made several piano roll recordings and wrote the [Tales of an Old Grandmother](#) and [Four Pieces for Piano Op. 32](#).

Unfortunately, the stodgy American musical press and the novelty of being a product of the emerging Bolshevik state cast a shadow on his new music. He was billed as the "Bolshevik Pianist" in promotional posters, and his playing was often described as "barbaric." The negative reviews and close-mindedness of many musicians took their toll on Prokofiev. He quickly grew bitter about America:

At times, as I roamed New York's Central Park and looked up at the skyscrapers facing it, I would think with cold fury of all the wonderful orchestras in America that cared nothing about my music; of the critics who never tired of uttering platitudes such as 'Beethoven is a great composer' and who balked violently at anything new; of the managers who arranged long tours for artists playing the same old hackneyed programme fifty times over. I had come here too soon: the child was not old enough to appreciate new music.

Before he left America, he did score some triumphs, though. On a trip to Chicago in December of 1918, performances of his First Piano Concerto and Scythian Suite were unequivocally successful. After the concerts, the Chicago Opera asked him to stage one of his operas. He had only one completed opera by that time, [The Gambler](#), the score of which he had left in Russia. And since he had abandoned Maddalena, he offered to complete the unfinished [Love for Three Oranges](#). The Chicago Opera accepted and a contract was written to premiere the work in the Fall of 1919. After one of his performances in New York, Prokofiev scored his most lasting triumph -- he met his future wife Carolina Codina, a

soprano more well recognized by her stage name, Lina Llubera.

Despite meeting Lina, these were difficult times for Prokofiev. He was stricken with diphtheria and scarlet fever and his performances in New York were now regularly reviled in the press:

In these days when peace is heralded and the world is turning from dissonance to harmony, it comes as a shock to listen to such a program. Those who do not believe that genius is evident in superabundance of noise looked in vain for a new musical message in Mr. Prokofiev's work. Nor in the Classical Symphony, which the composer conducted, was there any cessation from the orgy of discordant sounds.

Musical America, New York, 21-December-1918

Even though he finished the Love for Three Oranges on time, the director of the Chicago Opera, Cleofonte Campanini died suddenly in December 1919 and the premiere was postponed until the following year. Prokofiev was left unpaid for his opera, and concert appearances were drying up. Once again poor and out of work, Prokofiev set sail for Paris in the spring of 1920 to hook up with Diaghilev.

It is ironic that Prokofiev left American shores on such bitter terms. When The Love for Three Oranges finally did premiere in Chicago in December 1920, it was an immediate hit. So successful was the reception in fact, that it was staged in opera houses throughout Europe.

Upon arriving in Paris, Prokofiev sought out Diaghilev. Diaghilev asked Prokofiev to stage his ballet The Buffoon for the Ballet Russes. So Prokofiev took up residence in a rented house in Mantes-La-Jolie and began revising the score for The Buffoon. Having avoided returning to Russia, Prokofiev asked his mother, who was in poor health, to join him in Paris. That she did in spite of the tremendous difficulties entailed by the move. They were also joined by Lina, who visited them in Paris for a short period. Prokofiev spent the better part of 1920 reworking The Buffoon. The Buffoon premiered in Paris on 17-May-1921 and in London on 09-June-1921. The public praised the work and the critics tore into it. The British musical press was particularly harsh. It is generally agreed that the critical disapproval of The Buffoon had more to do with its bizarre storyline than Prokofiev's music. Whatever the reason, the work had a short life on the stage. More impressed were Prokofiev's adoring fans. He also won over new listeners, among them Henri Matisse, who liked The Buffoon so much he sketched [a portrait of Prokofiev](#). Around the same time, Prokofiev also met Pablo Picasso and Maurice Ravel. The Scythian Suite also received its Paris premiere in 1921.

Prokofiev took a detour back to America in the autumn of 1921 to oversee the premiere of his *Love for Three Oranges* and the [Third Piano Concerto](#). Both premiered in Chicago in December of 1921. The Chicago Opera gave the premiere of *The Love for Three Oranges* and the composer performed his *Third Piano Concerto*. While the response in Chicago was enthusiastic for both works, premieres in New York a few months later provoked hostility. Prokofiev was bewildered by the opposite reactions: "The American season, which had begun so brilliantly, completely fizzled out." Again the idiosyncratic American response to his music prompted a return to the comfort of Europe.

Rather than return to the bustle of Paris, Prokofiev sought instead the quiet of the Bavarian Alps. He settled in a rented home in the town of Ettal, where he would spend most of 1922-23. While the prolific Prokofiev cleaned up a number of works for publication, he devoted most of his energies during this time to his new opera [The Fiery Angel](#). Based on a mystical novel by Valery Bryusov, the *Fiery Angel* was a purely Prokofiev-inspired endeavor. The work languished in various incarnations, never to be performed while the composer was alive.

During this Ettal period, Lina studied opera in nearby Milan. The quiet of the Bavarian Alps also nurtured Prokofiev's budding romance with Lina. They were married in September of 1923. Prokofiev also devoted much time to caring for his mother, whose sight had finally failed her. His recent marriage and continued devotion to the care of his mother probably weighed heavily in Prokofiev's decision to turn down an official invitation to return to Russia to perform with the Leningrad Philharmonic. Now part of the Soviet Union, Russia was enduring harsh times -- the civil war had recently ended and the harsh economic policies of Lenin and Stalin were taking their toll. Prokofiev's friends who had stayed in the Soviet Union, including Miaskovsky, had remained in touch during his American and European travels. They urged Prokofiev to return, letting him know that his music was being performed in Soviet concert halls.

Although Prokofiev decided to stay in Europe, he left his options open for an eventual return to his homeland. Thus he returned to Paris in the autumn of 1923, with Lina and his mother in tow. The move was accompanied with both happiness and tragedy. Lina gave birth to their first son, Sviatoslav, on 27-February-1924. But Prokofiev's joy at becoming a father was tempered by the loss of his mother in December 1924. The events proved distracting to his composing. The only major work to emerge in 1924 was the development of a [Symphonic Suite](#) from his opera *Love of Three Oranges*. Although written initially to satisfy conductors eager to play his music without having to stage extravagant, multi-hour productions, the *Symphonic Suite* became one of Prokofiev's strongest musical forms. He would eventually write no less than twenty-five *Symphonic Suites* derived from various stage and film

works.

At about this time, Koussevitzky commissioned Prokofiev to write a new Symphony. While Prokofiev worked on his [Second Symphony](#), Koussevitzky premiered in Paris several works which had gone unperformed, most notably the [Cantata "Seven, They are Seven"](#) and the [First Violin Concerto](#). Both works were completed in that prolific year of 1917, but had remained unplayed. The premiere of the lyrical First Violin Concerto in 1923 was poorly timed. Accustomed to new, daring works by Stravinsky and Prokofiev himself, the audience found the concerto too conventional. If the First Violin Concerto would take years to gain favor, the Second Symphony enjoyed no such reprieve. Prokofiev aimed to make the symphony "hard as iron and steel". This objective he achieved. It flopped when premiered by Koussevitzky in Paris on 06-June-1925. Even Prokofiev found it lacking: Neither I nor the audience understood anything in it. It was too thickly woven. There were too many layers of counterpoint which degenerated into mere figuration... This was perhaps the first time it appeared to me that I might be destined to be a second-rate composer.

Never one to turn his back on a work, even one as poorly liked as the Second Symphony, Prokofiev tried to rescue it later in life as Opus 136, but never realised the re-working. While the Second Symphony is more remembered for its inauspicious debut, it did have a few supporters. The French composer Francis Poulenc liked it, and, more importantly, Sergei Diaghilev took note. Diaghilev had up until then fallen out with Prokofiev, spurned by Prokofiev's refusal to create a ballet version of *The Love of Three Oranges*.

For whatever reason, Diaghilev made amends and asked Prokofiev to compose a new ballet, [Le Pas d'Acier \(The Steel Step\)](#). Much of the scoring was done while he and Lina gave a concert tour of the United States in 1925. Half of the American tour was with Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony. They returned to Paris, toured Italy in 1926, and Prokofiev completed writing *Le Pas d'Acier*. The premieres in Paris and London in 1927 were both wildly successful with the public -- thanks in part to the bold stage and costume designs of the artist Georgy Yakulov.

While his notoriety grew in Europe, Prokofiev longed to return to his homeland. He had maintained correspondence with friends inside the Soviet Union and towards the end of 1926, he began negotiations in earnest with Soviet authorities on the terms of a return tour. To the Soviet music authorities, Prokofiev's return presented a dilemma. On the one hand he was an unquestioned leader of the new music movement and could bring legitimacy to their fledgling state, at least on a musical level. On the other hand, Prokofiev's modernism was still foreign to much of the Soviet public and a highly publicized return might promote unrest. The Soviet leadership was still smarting over Stravinsky's departure and vow never to return. His unimpeachable stardom in the west and Prokofiev's similarity in style also foreshadowed trouble. Thus it was at great risk that the Soviet music

apparatchiks approved Prokofiev's return.

Prokofiev returned to his homeland in January of 1927. He toured for two-and-a-half months. Everywhere he played, eager crowds packed music halls. The return tour was a resounding success. He was celebrated as a Russian hero whose revolutionary music had conquered the West. While the accolades were perhaps out of proportion to his real stature in Western music, the experience etched in Prokofiev's mind the notion that perhaps a return to the Soviet Union some day could afford him the chance to escape Stravinsky's shadow once and for all. While Prokofiev returned to Paris following the tour, the genesis for a permanent return "home" had been made.

Prokofiev's second son Oleg was born in 14-December-1928.

The failure of his epic Second Symphony weighed on Prokofiev's mind when he returned to Paris. Koussevitzky, now one of Prokofiev's strongest champions, had recently conducted orchestral performances of part of the opera *The Fiery Angel*. Encouraged by the strength of the material, Prokofiev set about to make a Symphonic Suite based on the opera. However, he turned that thought into the development of a full symphony, the [Third \(Opus 44\)](#). Based on thematic material from *The Fiery Angel*, the Third Symphony also afforded Prokofiev a chance to redeem himself for the failure of the Second Symphony. Pierre Monteux premiered the Third Symphony on 17-May-1929 in Paris. Prokofiev (and the critics) were much happier with the results. Prokofiev later remarked, "I have succeeded in deepening my musical language."

Before the Third Symphony was completed, Diaghilev commissioned Prokofiev to create another ballet. The work, entitled [The Prodigal Son](#), was completed fairly quickly, although its production was another story. The designer, George Rouault, did not deliver his sketches as promised, thus prompting Diaghilev to break into his apartment and take them. The leading dancer, Serge Lifar, disliked his role so much that on opening night he refused to go to the theater, until pangs of guilt at abandoning Diaghilev prompted him to reconsider. Meanwhile, Prokofiev patiently waited at the podium for Lifar to arrive. The work was well received by audiences, critics, and even Prokofiev himself. But the behind-the-scenes shenanigans continued: shortly after the premiere, Prokofiev was sued by the scenarist for publishing *The Prodigal Son* without his permission. Nothing much came of the lawsuit. More importantly, and tragically, Diaghilev died two months later in Venice. The loss was another important factor that weighed in Prokofiev's impending decision to return to the Soviet Union.

After the drama surrounding *The Prodigal Son*, Prokofiev turned his attention next to the [Fourth Symphony](#). Koussevitzky had commissioned several contemporary composers, Stravinsky and Prokofiev foremost among them, to write new works to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Boston Symphony. Prokofiev borrowed heavily from *The Prodigal Son* for the new Symphony, so much so that

he would later write at length in his memoirs justifying the similarities:

...in some passages of the Symphony I have used the same musical material which is introduced in the ballet The Prodigal Son. This does not lead to the conclusion that the Symphony is written on the material extracted from The Prodigal Son or that The Prodigal Son on the material from the Symphony. Merely, in the Symphony I had the possibility to develop symphonically what a ballet-form did not enable me to do. A precedent may be recalled with Beethoven's Ballet The Creatures of Prometheus and his Symphony No. 3.

Koussevitzky conducted the premier performance with his Boston Symphony on 14-November-1930. The public reception was lukewarm. The tepid response, accompanied by accusations of too much borrowing from The Prodigal Son, would prompt Prokofiev to revisit the work in 1947, whereupon he substantially revised (and lengthened) the [Fourth Symphony](#).

Prokofiev had also returned to the United States in 1930 for a tour which extended into Canada and Cuba. The tour was enormously successful, even prompting a commission for a new String Quartet from the Library of Congress. The work, the [String Quartet No. 1 Opus 50](#), contains a profoundly sweeping Finale. Prokofiev liked it so much, he re-scored the fourth movement (Andante) for string orchestra as [Opus 50bis](#).

The period 1930-32 were to be Prokofiev's last in the West. He had made a brief return to the Soviet Union in 1929, but it was clouded in controversy. The polarization between East and West was growing and Stalin had recently taken over the reigns of power. The result was a much greater conflict of vision between free Europe and America, and the communist Soviet Union. This conflict extended well into cultural and social avenues as well as economic and political. Prokofiev's works were viewed as too bourgeois, some Soviets descending to label him an 'enemy of Soviet culture.' The criticism from his homeland troubled Prokofiev deeply. A string of compositions followed which were mostly disliked by the public.

The first of these poorly-received works was a ballet newly commissioned by the Paris Opera. Started in the summer of 1930, [Sur le Borysthene](#) (On the Dneiper) premiered in Paris in December of 1932. It was harshly received, and closed shortly after it opened. Thereupon followed another failure -- the [Fourth Piano Concerto](#). Commissioned in 1931 by the Austrian pianist Paul Wittgenstein who had lost his right arm in World War I, the Fourth Piano Concerto was one in a number of piano works Wittgenstein had commissioned from major composers including Strauss and Ravel. Wittgenstein disliked all the works he commissioned, including Prokofiev's. When Prokofiev sent him the completed score, Wittgenstein promptly returned it with a note attached: "I thank you for your concerto, but I do not understand a single note and I shall not play it." The work was sadly shelved, never to be performed while Prokofiev was alive. It

eventually premiered on 05-September-1956 by pianist Siegfried Rapp.

Ten years had elapsed between the Third and Fourth Piano Concertos and Prokofiev found a renewed interest in his favorite instrument, the piano. Shortly after completing the Fourth Piano Concerto in 1931, he began composing the Fifth. Smarting from accusations of recycling his music in the Fourth Symphony, Prokofiev strove for new musical ideas in his Piano Concertos.

More than ten years had passed since I had written a piano concerto. Since then my conceptions of the treatment of this form had changed somewhat, some new ideas had occurred to me, and finally I had accumulated a good number of vigorous major themes in my notebook. I had not intended the concerto to be difficult...but in the end it turned out to be complicated, as indeed was the case with a good many other compositions of this period. What was the explanation? In my desire for simplicity I was hampered by the fear of repeating old formulas, of reverting to 'old simplicity', which is something all modern composers seek to avoid.

For certain, the Third and Fourth Concertos are worlds apart. The [Fifth Piano Concerto](#) is even more distant from the Third in melodic complexity. Prokofiev admitted, "I had enough melodies to make three concertos." However, he compacted the numerous ideas into a five movement concerto that lasts only twenty-odd minutes. Prokofiev premiered the Fifth Concerto on 31 October 1932 with the Berlin Philharmonic under the direction of Wilhelm Furtwängler. While Prokofiev was pleased with the premiere, the concerto went unplayed by other pianists until it was championed by the brilliant young Russian pianist [Sviatoslav Richter](#) almost a decade later in the 1940s.

His latest piano concertos poorly received, Prokofiev thus embarked to the Soviet Union on his third concert tour in 1932. His second return in 1929 had been marked with controversy, the Bolshoi having refused to stage *Le Pas d'Acier* after pressure from the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM). The third Soviet concert tour in 1932 was less tumultuous. The RAPM had dissolved and thus open criticism of his "anti-Soviet" ideas had died down. As in the past, the Soviet public greeted their hero with loving adoration. Prokofiev had become recognized as one of Russia's greatest living composers. In the Soviet Union, he did not have to contend with fickle crowds and a consistently hostile musical press. Most importantly, Prokofiev was at his core a Russian. His best friends were Russian and he longed to be back among his people. Some historians speculate that Prokofiev was creatively tired with the direction of his music in Europe and America. Whatever the root causes, the third Soviet tour in 1932 further convinced Prokofiev that he should return for good. The Soviet government employed some good old-fashioned capitalist incentives to further persuade Prokofiev to stay -- they promised him an apartment in Moscow and a new car. In his memoirs, Prokofiev explained his decision to return thusly:

Here is how I feel about it: I care nothing for politics -- I'm a composer first and last. Any government that lets me write my music in peace, publishes everything I composed before the ink is dry, and performs every note that comes from my pen is all right with me. In Europe, we all have to fish for performances, cajole conductors and theatre directors; in Russian they come to me -- I can hardly keep up with the demand...



## RETURN HOME (1933-1941)

Prokofiev's return to the Soviet Union took several years -- from 1933 to 1936 he still considered Paris his home, but he frequently travelled to Moscow. More importantly, he began to receive commissions for new works from the Soviet Union. Prokofiev did not become a permanent Moscow resident until 1936.

This period between Paris and Moscow is marked by a number of new works, the most important of which were the ballet [Romeo and Juliet](#), the [Second Violin Concerto](#) and the music for the film Lieutenant Kijé. The latter work was Prokofiev's first Soviet commission. Based on an original story by Yuri Tynyanov, the film was created by Alexander Fienzimmer, with musical scoring by Prokofiev. Prokofiev reworked the film music into the now famous [Symphonic Suite \(Opus 60\)](#).

The Second Violin Concerto was written for the French violinist Robert Soetans and received its premiere by Soetans in Madrid on 01-December-1935. It was an immediate success and became even more popular when championed by [Jascha Heifetz](#) starting in 1937. The Second Violin Concerto is typical of the three major works in this period. They mark a transition from his 'Tocatta' and 'Grotesque' lines into his 'Lyrical' and 'Classical' lines. The 'lyrical' line actually can be found in earlier works such as the First Violin Concerto and many of his songs for voice and piano. The Second Violin Concerto is indeed very rich in its lyricism, yet very simple in rhythm -- in stark contrast to the complex, toccata rhythms of the Fourth and Fifth Piano concertos.

Romeo and Juliet was originally commissioned as a ballet work by the Kirov Theater in 1934. However, when Prokofiev proposed Romeo and Juliet as the subject, the Kirov objected ("living people can dance, the dying cannot.") So instead, Prokofiev signed a contract to stage Romeo and Juliet instead with the Bolshoi Ballet Theater. As with other Prokofiev stage productions, the journey from commission to premiere was anything but smooth. Upon seeing the score in the summer of 1935, the Bolshoi declared the work undanceable. The work languished unperformed for several years. It finally received a premiere on 30-December-1938 at the Brno Opera House in Prague. Not one to waste music, Prokofiev did not wait for the Bolshoi to stage his work. He crafted two [Symphonic Suites](#) and a [piano transcription \(Opus 75\)](#) out of the ballet score in 1936 and 1937 respectively, and a [Third Symphonic Suite in 1946](#). Both the symphonic and piano transcriptions were warmly accepted by the public. The

reception of the ballet at Brno in 1938 was equally positive. Only after this success did the Kirov and Bolshoi take notice again. The Kirov eventually staged *Romeo and Juliet* in 1940 and the Bolshoi in 1946.

Lieutenant Kijé also marks the beginning of a period of intense interest by Prokofiev in film music. He scored music for Sergei Eisenstein's epic [Alexander Nevsky](#) in 1939, followed shortly by scores for [Lermontov](#) (1941), [Partisans in the Ukrainian Steppes](#) (1942), [Tonya](#) (1942), [Kotovsky](#) (1942), and [Ivan the Terrible](#) (1942-5). Prokofiev even undertook a special trip to Hollywood during his last tour of the United States in 1938. He closely studied the techniques of filmmakers and composers in the Hollywood studios, with an eye towards taking the knowledge back with him to the Soviet Union. *Alexander Nevsky* afforded Prokofiev the opportunity to apply what he had learned in Hollywood. The collaboration between Eisenstein and Prokofiev was extraordinary in its synchronicity. Prokofiev later scored a Cantata from the film music in [Opus 78](#). To this day, it remains a landmark work in the choral repertoire.

Prokofiev also applied his superb scoring skills to the theatrical stage as well. He wrote music for several plays including [Egyptian Nights](#) (1934), [Boris Godunov](#) (1936), [Eugene Onegin](#) (1936), and [Hamlet](#) (1937). In the same genre and at the same time, Prokofiev was asked by the Central Children's Theater to write a new musical symphony just for children. The intent was to cultivate 'musical tastes in children from the first years of school.' Intrigued by the invitation, Prokofiev set about the project with usual aplomb and completed [Peter and the Wolf](#) in just four day's time. The debut on 02-May-1936 was, in the composer's words, inauspicious at best: "(attendance) was rather poor and failed to attract much attention."

By this time, all of Prokofiev's commissions were coming from within the Soviet Union. He had moved permanently to his Moscow apartment and in May of 1936 Lina arrived with Oleg and Sviatoslav. The return to Moscow now completed, Soviet officials no longer afforded Prokofiev special treatment. Whereas in previous years they had bent over backwards to accommodate his preference for living in the West, now they turned a cold shoulder. The Soviet Union had endured extraordinary depravity in its nascent years, bloodied by World War I, invaded by the Western allies and Japan in 1918 in an oft-forgotten intervention, further ravaged by a long and brutal Civil War, followed by years of generally disastrous economic experiments, and a period of horrific repression by Stalin in the 1930's. Life was harsh by most measures. Millions of Soviets had died either at the hands of their own government or from starvation. Although rapid industrialization during the Five Year Plans of 1928-1937 improved the situation somewhat, the standard of living even in Moscow was a far cry from the comforts of burgeoise Paris. However harsh the conditions and increasingly strict the official

party line, Prokofiev persevered.

The change in the process of composing music was stark. In Europe, a composer's creative vision was tempered only by economic realities. If the public didn't like your music, theater owners would not pay you to write new music. And unless you were supported by rich benefactors, you didn't eat. At its worst, it was a competitive arena and a composer had to temper artistic integrity with an occasional dose of popular music. Fortunately, Paris, London, Chicago and the other centers of music in the West were very advanced in their musical tastes compared to the Soviet Union. For this reason, contemporary music generally flourished.

In the Soviet Union, the environment was completely different. From the beginning, the Soviet Union was centrally controlled -- by party leaders in Moscow who dictated everything that was to be created, consumed or conceived. Artistic freedom was non-existent. Creativity was stifled by the whims of appointed party bureaucrats who created the official rules. Changes in Soviet leadership since the October Revolution only worsened the situation for artists and writers. In 1932 Stalin introduced his cultural policy of 'Socialist Realism.' A year later, the party bureaucrats had distilled this notion into guidelines for composers:

The main attention of the Soviet composer must be directed towards the victorious progressive principles of reality, towards all that is heroic, bright and beautiful. This distinguishes the spiritual world of Soviet man and must be embodied in musical images full of beauty and strength. Socialist Realism demands an implacable struggle against folk-negating modernistic directions that are typical of the decay of contemporary bourgeois art, against subservience and servility towards modern bourgeois culture. In practice, the results were stifling. New compositions out of step with 'Socialist Realism' were criticized and their composers publically ridiculed. Both Shostakovich and Prokofiev were to suffer far worse privations for stepping outside the boundaries of officially proscribed doctrine. By comparison, though, composers and musicians under the Soviet yoke fared far better than Soviet writers, artists and architects.

Initially, Prokofiev at least publically embraced the Soviet ideology. He composed the monumental [Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution](#) in 1936-37, and the [Zdravitsa \(Hail to Stalin\) Cantata](#) in 1939. The 20th Anniversary Cantata was rejected as too modernist and never performed during Prokofiev's lifetime. Prokofiev again tried to tow the party line in the summer of 1938 when he began a new opera, which he hoped to compose on a contemporary Soviet theme. The work, [Semyon Kotko](#), followed the story of a young hero during the occupation of Ukraine by the Germans after the revolution. The

Germans were the villain of the story -- a wrinkle which unbeknownst to Prokofiev would doom the work to an ugly fate.

Prior to 1939, relations between Germany and Russia had rapidly deteriorated. Hitler's rise to power in Germany foreshadowed yet another World War in Europe in two decades. In 1938, Germany annexed the Sudetenland region of Czechoslovakia. The Soviets stood ready to defend the Czechs against Hitler's aggression when Chamberlain and the French capitulated at the infamous Munich meeting in September of 1938. Now completely isolated, the Soviets sought security through appeasement. Stalin and Hitler signed a non-aggression treaty on 23-August-1939, paving the way for Hitler's invasion of Poland a week later.

More importantly in its effect on Prokofiev, Germany was suddenly an ally of the Soviet Union. The imminent staging of Semyon Kotko with its portrayal of a brutal German occupation was unfathomable to Stalin. Vsevolod Meyerhold, Prokofiev's longtime friend and the producer of Semyon Kotko, was arrested during the production of the opera and executed. The Germans in the opera were re-cast as unnamed villains. Even such drastic actions did not soothe Stalin's paranoia -- Semyon Kotko was 'removed' from the official repertoire and was not 'politically rehabilitated' until 1970.

Even more detrimental to Prokofiev's fortunes, the Soviet Union's rapprochement with Germany severed ties with France, Great Britain, the United States, and the rest of the Allies. As a consequence, there was no longer any need to let Prokofiev travel abroad as an ambassador of music. And so it was decreed. Prokofiev no longer was allowed to tour outside the Soviet Union. The heavy-handedness would soon have tragic consequences on Prokofiev's family life. Lina was Spanish by birth -- a dangerous fact in Stalin's paranoid state. Foreigners were mistrusted. Ethnic minorities outside Russia proper suffered far worse. At least for now Lina was safe from deportation, starvation or execution -- the preferred methods for dealing with non-Russians.

In this increasingly dangerous environment, Prokofiev continued to compose. Even the outbreak of the Second World War did not diminish his productivity. In fact, Prokofiev became more prolific -- perhaps an indication of his withdrawal from politics and daily hardships into his music. In 1939, he worked simultaneously on a huge number of works: three Piano Sonatas (Nos. [6](#), [7](#) and [8](#)), the [Sonata for Violin and Piano in F minor](#), Semyon Kotko, and several patriotic works.

Prokofiev began writing his last complete opera, [The Duenna](#) (Betrothal in a Monastery), in 1940. Its staging was delayed by the outbreak of war. When it finally premiered after the War in 1946, it was roundly praised within the Soviet Union. The Duenna was also important because it marked the beginning of Prokofiev's relationship with the poet Mira Mendelssohn. Mira had met Prokofiev in 1938, when she was but twenty-three years old. Mira collaborated with

Prokofiev on the Duenna and wrote many of the verses. She later helped write the lyrics for his next opera, War and Peace, and several other minor works.



## THE WAR (1941-1945)

The German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 came as a complete surprise to most Russians, most notably Stalin. Typical of Stalin during this period, his paranoia prompted bizarre overreactions. He ordered all senior cultural leaders out of Moscow, fearing they might be the target of German spies. Prokofiev was among those named to leave Moscow for the Caucasus. The year had already started badly for the composer. He had suffered a heart attack in the Spring. The sudden decree to leave Moscow caused even more disruption in his life. Lina stayed behind in Moscow with their two sons. Strangely, Mira was evacuated from Moscow along with Prokofiev and other 'cultural leaders.'

Despite the separation from his family and the harsh conditions imposed by war, Prokofiev remained prolific. He completed his 'War' sonatas for the Piano (Nos. [6](#), [7](#) and [8](#)). He wrote his most sweeping opera yet, [War and Peace](#), based on Tolstoy's monumental novel. Prokofiev's treatment was equally monumental. It would take him nearly ten years to complete the work. He also began sketches for another opera, [Khan Buzay](#), but later abandoned it. During this time, Prokofiev also wrote incidental music for four films, the epic [Cinderella](#) ballet, a number of Symphonic Suites, the [String Quartet No. 2](#), a [Sonata for Flute and Piano](#), a [transcription of that same Flute Sonata for Violin and Piano](#) (made at the request of violinist [David Oistrakh](#)), two military Marches, several folk songs, and the towering [Fifth Symphony](#). This is an amazing string of works by any measure.

The 'War' sonatas are magnificent in their dynamism and span, almost orchestral in their sonority. The [Sixth Sonata](#) has emerged over the years as Prokofiev's most oft-recorded sonata. He gave the premiere performance himself in a Moscow Radio broadcast in 1940. By the time the [Seventh Sonata](#) was completed in 1942, Prokofiev's health had deteriorated for many reasons and he was unable to premiere the work. Sviatoslav Richter was selected to debut the work, which he did in 1943. The motoric Third Movement is the pinnacle of Prokofiev's 'toccata' line, unrelenting in its rhythm and power. He was awarded his first Stalin Prize for the Seventh Sonata. When the [Eighth Sonata](#) was completed in 1944, Prokofiev was again unhealthy enough to play the premiere. This time he selected another brilliant young Soviet pianist, [Emil Gilels](#), in his stead. Gilels premiere performance came on 29 December 1944. Although not as popular as the Sixth and Seventh, the Eighth Sonata stands as perhaps the greatest of the cycle. Richter called it "the richest of all of Prokofiev's sonatas. It has

a complex inner life with profound contrapositions."

The [Second String Quartet](#) also was extremely successful. Prokofiev's lifelong friend Miaskovsky, ever critical and never one to mince words, called it simply "magnificent music."

[Cinderella](#), second only to Romeo and Juliet in popularity among Prokofiev's ballets, followed a circuitous route to its premiere on the Bolshoi stage in 1945. The work was originally commissioned by the Kirov Theater just prior to the outbreak of the German invasion. Prokofiev was in fact working on the piano score to the second act of the ballet when the invasion began. The tumultuous days after the invasion placed the project on hold. In fact, Prokofiev laid aside the work for two years to focus his energies on the opera War and Peace and other smaller works. When Prokofiev resumed work on Cinderella at the end of 1943, he completed a set of piano transcriptions ([Opus 95](#) and [97](#)) before he completed the orchestration (he completed a third set of piano transcriptions later as [Opus 102](#).) The ballet received its premiere on 21-November-1945 in Moscow, with famed ballerina Galina Ulanova in the title role. Ulanova had danced the lead in Romeo and Juliet as well. The premiere was enormously well received, and its premiere by the Kirov in Leningrad five months later was also successful.

But of all the works in the wartime period, the most successful is his [Fifth Symphony](#). Work began on the Fifth Symphony in 1944 immediately after he completed the orchestral score for Cinderella:

I wrote my Fifth Symphony in the summer of 1944 and I consider my work on this symphony very significant both because of the musical material put into it and because I returned to the symphonic form after a sixteen-year interval. The Fifth Symphony completes, as it were, a long period of my works. I conceived it as a symphony of the greatness of the human spirit.

Prokofiev conducted the premiere of the Fifth in Moscow on 13-January-1945, on the eve of the Allied victory in the War. The work was highly praised. It quickly emerged as his most popular symphony and has remained to this day one of his greatest orchestral works. He was awarded his second Stalin Prize for it.

This brilliant culmination to a brilliant period in his composing life was short-lived. Later in January of 1945, Prokofiev fell and suffered a severe concussion. He nearly died in the following days, his recovery hampered by his earlier heart attack and general fatigue from overwork. He would suffer recurring headaches and periods of dangerously high blood pressure until his death eight years later. Prokofiev never fully recovered from this accident, although the greatness of works which were to follow gave no indication of it.



## TWILIGHT (1945-1953)

Prokofiev had since become involved with Mira Mendelson. He separated from Lina in 1941, although he never formally divorced her. Meanwhile, Lina had endured terrible hardships during and after the war. Separated from Sergei for several years and forced to raise Oleg and Sviatoslav on her own, Lina endured in war-torn Moscow. She was stricken with diphtheria towards the end of the war. To pile insult on top of tragedy, the Supreme Soviet decreed in February 1947 that Soviet citizens were forbidden from marrying foreigners. The law was one in a series of increasingly draconian measures passed by Stalin and his henchmen in the years following the war. The law was applied retroactively, thus nullifying Prokofiev's marriage with Lina. Times were desperate for her. Many other spouses and friends of prominent Soviet citizens at the time were exiled or executed on phony charges. It was in this climate that Lina tried to leave Russia with her sons.

It is not known how much Prokofiev tried to help Lina in her attempts to flee the Soviet Union. For certain Prokofiev had much to fear from attempting to assist his wife. Thousands of military and cultural leaders suspected of disloyalty were executed in Stalin's brutal purges after the war. Prokofiev married Mira in 1948, barely a year after the decree nullified his marriage with Lina. A month after Sergei and Mira were married, Lina was arrested on phony charges of espionage and sent to a labor camp in Komi. There she remained for eight years. Lina was eventually released from prison and lived in Moscow until 1972, when she returned to the West.

Meanwhile, Prokofiev, in spite of his deteriorating health, continued to compose. His work ethic, which is to say his propensity to overwork, complicated his health problems. Even long spells in the hospital did not deter his composing.

In commemoration of the end of the war, he wrote the [Ode to the End of the War](#) for a mixed ensemble including 8 harps, 4 pianos, wind, percussion and double basses. Among major works completed after the War, Prokofiev wrote the [Symphony No. 6](#) (1945-4), the magnificent [Violin Sonata No 2 in D Major](#) (1947), the ballet the [Tale of the Stone Flower](#) (1948-50), and two striking works for Cello: the [Sonata for Cello and Piano Op.119](#) (1949) and the [Sinfonia Concertante for Cello and Orchestra](#) (1950-51.) Both of the cello works were composed with the collaboration of Prokofiev's friend [Mstislav Rostropovich](#). Rostropovich and Richter premiered both pieces.

More characteristic of pieces in the last years are either revisions to earlier works, or works which were never completed. In the latter category, Prokofiev returned to one of his vaunted forms, the piano sonata. He started early sketches for the [Tenth Piano Sonata](#), but never completed it. He planned an [Eleventh Piano Sonata](#) and a [concerto for two pianos and string orchestra](#), but never put notes to paper. The last of his complete Piano Sonatas, the [Ninth](#), was completed in 1947 and premiered by Richter.

Complicating life was the increasing cultural repression of paranoid Soviet leaders. With the onset of the Cold War, Stalin further isolated his people from the countries of the West, reaffirming the superiority of Communist orthodoxy in culture and ideology. Chief architect of the return to Soviet orthodoxy in the arts was Andrei Zhdanov, then a member of the newly reformed elite Politburo. Zhdanov systematically went through works of literature, film, and art, publically denouncing works with any reputed tie to the West. This orgy of government denuncements, censorship, and intimidation became known as Zhdanovshchina ('Zhdanov's Terror'.) Prokofiev became the target in early 1948. Zhdanov denounced Prokofiev, Shostakovich, and Khatchaturian among other composers, as too cosmopolitan and formalist.

The effect on Prokofiev, weakened by illness, was demoralizing. He made a few half-hearted attempts to defend himself and his music. Now out of official favor, Prokofiev struggled to balance his inner artistic desires with his love of country. To appease Zhdanov and the cultural apartchiks, Prokofiev churned out a series of unspectacular and bland patriotic works, including the [Festive Poem "Thirty Years" for Orchestra](#) (1947), the opera [Story of a Real Man](#) (1947-48), [Winter Bonfire](#) (1949-50), and the oratorio [On Guard for Peace](#) (1950).

Further compounding Prokofiev's worsening conditions were the deaths of many of his dearest friends. Miaskovsky's death in August of 1950 culminated this low point in his life.









Down but not beaten, Prokofiev still managed to compose works of import. Perhaps Prokofiev's final substantive work is his somber [Symphony No. 7](#), composed in 1951 and 1952. Composed for young listeners and in such a dark period of tragedy and cultural repression, the Seventh Symphony is variously viewed as overly simplistic or banal by its critics, but with dark emotions beneath the surface it endures as one of his more oft-played symphonies today. The public debut of the Seventh Symphony was to be Prokofiev's last public appearance.


The end was tragically ironic. Sergei Prokofiev died on the same day as Stalin -- 05-March-1953. In fact, his death went unpublished and unknown to anyone but close friends for days. He had died of a massive brain hemorrhage about an hour before Stalin. The excess of

state-ordered mourning after the death of Stalin cast one final, disgraceful shadow over Prokofiev. Because of the official mourning for Stalin, only about 40 people were able to attend a civil funeral the next day at the Composers' Union. David Oistrakh played the first and third movements from the First Violin Sonata in F minor. Richter also attended the ceremony. Prokofiev's body was later buried at the Novodevichy Cemetery in Moscow.

Prokofiev was posthumously awarded the Lenin Prize in 1957 for his Seventh Symphony.

## WORKS BY GENRE

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li>
- [Cello](#)
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- [By # of Concerts](#) **NEW!**

**\*Note:** All known works are contained in this catalog except the 'Juvenilia' early piano works. These works will be added in the near future.

## ESSENTIAL WORKS

Title	Date	Genre
<a href="#">Alexander Nevsky, Cantata for mezzo-soprano, chorus and orchestra, Op 78</a>	1938-1939	Cantata
<a href="#">Chout (The Tale of the Buffoon), Ballet in Six Scenes, Op 21</a>	1915-1920	Ballet
<a href="#">Cinderella, Ballet in Three Acts, Op 87</a>	1940-1944	Ballet
<a href="#">The Fiery Angel, Op 37</a>	1919-1927	Opera
<a href="#">Lieutenant Kijé - Symphonic Suite, Op 60</a>	1934	Orchestral Suite
<a href="#">The Love for Three Oranges: Symphonic Suite, Op 33bis</a>	1924	Orchestral Suite
<a href="#">Peter and the Wolf, Op 67</a>	1936	Speaker & Orchestra
<a href="#">Piano Concerto No 2 in G minor, Op 16</a>	1912-1913	Piano Concerto
<a href="#">Piano Concerto No 3 in C major, Op 26</a>	1917-1921	Piano Concerto
<a href="#">Piano Sonata No 6 in A major, Op 82</a>	1939-1940	Piano Sonata
<a href="#">Piano Sonata No 7 in B flat major, Op 83</a>	1939-1942	Piano Sonata
<a href="#">Piano Sonata No 8 in B flat major, Op 84</a>	1939-1944	Piano Sonata
<a href="#">Romeo and Juliet, Ballet in Four Acts, Op 64</a>	1935-1936	Ballet
<a href="#">Scythian Suite, from Ala and Lolli, Op 20</a>	1914-1915	Orchestral Suite
<a href="#">Sonata for Violin and Piano No 1 in F minor, Op 80</a>	1938-1946	Violin Sonata
<a href="#">Symphony No 1 in D major "Classical", Op 25</a>	1916-1917	Symphony
<a href="#">Symphony No 5 in B flat major, Op 100</a>	1944	Symphony
<a href="#">Symphony No 6 in E flat minor, Op 111</a>	1945-1947	Symphony
<a href="#">Toccata in D minor, Op 11</a>	1912	Piano
<a href="#">Violin Concerto No 1 in D major, Op 19</a>	1916-1917	Violin Concerto
<a href="#">Violin Concerto No 2 in G minor, Op 63</a>	1935	Violin Concerto
<a href="#">Visions Fugitives, Op 22</a>	1915-1917	Piano
<a href="#">War and Peace, Op 91</a>	1941-1952	Opera

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