

Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op. 100

Sergei Prokofiev

Prokofiev's seven symphonies cover a span of 36 years, from his First, the much-loved *Classical* Symphony, composed in 1916–17, through to his Seventh, his last major work, written in 1951–52. Yet his involvement with the genre was even longer than that — covering 50 years, in fact — as he had produced a Symphony in G major back in 1902 when he was an 11-year-old prodigy taking private composition lessons from Reinhold Glière. That piece was not published, and its interest today is principally historical. Neither did Prokofiev publish the Symphony in E minor that he wrote in 1908 during a summer vacation from his studies at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Already, while working on that latter symphony, Prokofiev was developing strong opinions about the genre, which he articulated in a letter to his friend, composer Nikolai Miaskovsky:

What can be worse than a long symphony?

In my opinion, a symphony should ideally last 20 minutes, or 30 maximum. I am trying to write mine as compactly as possible: I'm crossing out even the slightest "wordiness" with a merciless pencil.

Prokofiev had already grasped the concept of "less is more," and spareness, tautness, and carefully considered balance would remain hallmarks of his mature work.

That's not to say that he was inflexible on the matter of symphonies ideally lasting only 20 minutes. His first official symphony, the *Classical*, comes in a few minutes shorter than that, but the Fifth runs to nearly 45 minutes. Nonetheless, Prokofiev could not be accused of "sprawl" as his symphonies unrolled. As he aged, he never lost his command of the compact.

World War II was in full swing while Prokofiev worked on his Symphony No. 5, during the summer of 1944, but he was sheltered from the hostilities, living in an artists' retreat 150 miles northeast of Moscow. Shortly after the premiere, he wrote:

I regard the Fifth Symphony as the culmination of a long period of my creative life. I conceived of it as glorifying the grandeur of the human spirit ... praising the free and happy man — his strength, his generosity, and the purity of his soul.

The opening movement, which is somewhat slower than traditional symphonic first movements, does indeed convey a sense of grandeur and heroism, nowhere more than in the epic vision of its spectacular coda. A fast movement follows, so full of hilarity and

IN SHORT

Born: either April 23, as he claimed, or April 27 (according to his birth certificate), 1891, in Sontsovka, Ekaterinoslav district, Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow, USSR

Work composed: summer 1944, drawing on material sketched in the preceding decade; the orchestration was completed that November

World premiere: January 13, 1945, in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, by the State Symphonic Orchestra of the USSR, with the composer conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 21, 1946, Artur Rodziński, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 18, 2014, Case Scaglione, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 43 minutes

satire as to become one of the composer's most irrepressible scherzos. The third movement is a study in elegant lyricism, though not without tragic overtones; and the finale, after reminiscing about some material alluding to the first movement, pours forth with giddy high spirits and optimistic affirmation.

Public curiosity ran high when this work was introduced. Prokofiev wrote that his Fifth Symphony was

very important not only for the musical material that went into it, but also because I was returning to the symphonic form after a break of 16 years.

It was, moreover, the first symphony he had written since moving back to his native land following his years as an expatriate, from 1918 to 1936, and so was viewed as his first properly Soviet symphony. It scored a huge success at its premiere, on an all-Prokofiev program that also included the *Classical* Symphony and *Peter and the Wolf*. The symphony's wide-ranging but broadly optimistic spirit combined with the circumstances of wartime patriotism to create a perfect storm

of enthusiasm on Soviet stages, and it wasted no time whipping up similar excitement in the United States. On November 19, 1945, a week after Serge Koussevitzky led the Boston Symphony Orchestra in the U.S. Premiere, Prokofiev's picture graced the cover of *Time* magazine. The magazine's lengthy profile of him quoted Koussevitzky's assessment:

[The Fifth Symphony is] the greatest musical event in many, many years. The greatest since Brahms and Tchaikovsky! It is magnificent! It is yesterday, it is today, it is tomorrow.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tambourine, snare drum, wood block, bass drum, tam-tam, piano, harp, and strings.

Portions of this note originally appeared in the program books of the San Francisco Symphony and UBS-Verbier Youth Orchestra.
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Witness to the Premiere

Everyone who was anyone in Moscow's musical community was present in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory for the premiere of Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony in January 1945. The work was ardently anticipated, being his first new symphony in 16 years, and spirits were buoyed with the knowledge that the troops of the Red Army were just then embarking on their triumphant march into Nazi Germany. The eminent pianist Sviatoslav Richter, seated in the third row, offered this account:



Prokofiev, ca. 1950

The Great Hall was illuminated, no doubt, the same way it always was, but when Prokofiev stood up, the light seemed to pour straight down on him from somewhere up above. He stood like a monument on a pedestal. And then, when Prokofiev had taken his place on the podium and silence reigned in the hall, artillery salvos suddenly thundered forth. His baton was raised. He waited, and began only after the cannons had stopped. There was something very significant in this, something symbolic. It was as if all of us — including Prokofiev — had reached some kind of shared turning point.