



## Sergei Prokofiev: Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution

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In 1936 Prokofiev settled permanently in the Soviet Union having fled in the wake of the October Revolution of 1917. The general line is that he had become disillusioned with the West, had not achieved in either the US or France the kind of success he had hoped, and was desperately homesick. Dorothea Redepenning takes a somewhat different view in her booklet notes; which are, it has to be said, a rather unconvincing mixture of naivety, speculation and some historical fact. She sees Prokofiev's decision to return in a more cynical light, suggesting that, eclipsed by Rachmaninov in the US, and Stravinsky in France, Prokofiev seized the opportunity of the sudden political purge against Shostakovich (in the wake of his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*) to dash home and become the Soviet Union's No.1 composer.

Certainly one wonders what prompted Prokofiev to submit to the iron fist of Soviet rule, and we cannot rule out bare-faced ambition. Yet it is difficult to reconcile the Prokofiev of enfant terrible repute with the 45-year-old man willing, it would seem, to compromise his artistic ideals for the simple lure of fame within a regime he already knew full well was discredited in the eyes of the international community. Stranger still was his willingness to bend to the will of his new political masters by composing this massive 10-section Cantata celebrating the 20th anniversary of the very event which had driven him from Russia in the first place. With texts by Karl Marx, Lenin and Stalin, as well as a generous dose of the kind of "social realism" demanded of Soviet composers at the time, it would seem outwardly that Prokofiev was effectively rolling on his back and wriggling his legs in the air, in the hope that the regime would tickle his tummy.

The music, however, tells a very different story. Again the general line is that Prokofiev decided the satirical undercurrent in his music was a shade too obvious for his own good, and suppressed the work (it was never performed until over a decade after both his and Stalin's death). But Redepenning has her own theory. She suggests that there were those who viewed the "setting of texts by Lenin or Stalin as heresy", and that some in power "were apparently irritated by the sound of Lenin's speeches in combination with Prokofiev's music". In light of this, Molotov himself intervened and suggested that Prokofiev's Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution be submitted for approval by the Committee on the Arts. On 19th June 1937 Prokofiev did indeed play through the work to the committee, but Redepenning states that he not only played the work on the piano but sung it "very badly" at the same time. Whether Prokofiev deliberately sang it very badly in order for it to be rejected, or simply because singing and playing simultaneously were not

his thing, we can only speculate (Redepenning chooses not to).

All this looks as if the work might simply have been a typically overblown Soviet propaganda extravaganza to honour the heroes of the Bolshevik Revolution, the noble acts of Lenin and Stalin and the glorious devotion to the regime of the proletariat, and it is perhaps this, more even than the vast forces employed (amounting to several hundred individuals) that have kept the work on the periphery of Prokofiev discography. This recording unequivocally proves otherwise. This is a tremendous outpouring of the composer's genius, brilliant and inventive, clearly dating from the same time as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Alexander Nevsky* but both highly original and at times breathtakingly inventive.

A chorus of accordions, ostensibly included to tick the boxes required by the authorities to elevate the popular music of the people, seems such a fantastic new ingredient in Prokofiev's highly colourful orchestral palette, that one wonders why he did not use it in other works. The thundering percussion, the clanging bells, the blaring sirens and the speeches relayed through megaphone, might have political reasoning, but musically they add an unforgettable touch. Some of us may read the ghastly texts, hideous in their mundanity and triteness, and wonder how such drivel can inspire great music. (Others may wonder how such glorious political sentiments can begin to be matched by music of any description – never let it be said that MusicWeb International takes any particular political stance.) But the extraordinary thing about this work is how Prokofiev's music manages to walk that fine line between dramatic depiction of the events related in the words, and biting satire which, I am inclined to think, we recognise more with the benefit of hindsight.

Recorded live at a performance during last year's Weimar Kunstfests, one is conscious of a certain frisson of excitement and a tangible sense of electrical charge running through the performance – taking place, it should be said, on soil which, barely a quarter of a century before had been firmly within the Soviet bloc. The tremendous din of everything being thrown at the audience at the great climaxes of the sixth movement, "Revolution", perhaps one of the most unrestrained outbursts of musical violence since the *Scythian Suite*, obliterates any obvious audience noise, but the exuberant applause at the end (quickly curtailed on the recording) pays tribute to what is, by any reckoning, a powerful and electrifying performance in which Karabits marshals his massed forces with almost military precision; this is a truly fabulous exhibition of musical control. The recording captures the immensity of the sound superbly, although one suspects a constant hand on the levels to prevent the true dynamic range of the performance becoming too much of an obstacle to domestic listening.