



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

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Fanfare (Peter J. Rabinowitz - 2018.07.01)

Great music can't be destroyed by a third-rate text, even one, like the libretto of Madama Butterfly, that is politically insensitive. But how about good music, or even very good music? The Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution is a work that raises that question with a vengeance, setting snatches of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin that are (even beyond the political issues) hardly favorable to musical treatment. "Site the rebel HQ at the central telephone exchange" simply doesn't encourage a serious musical response—and that's far from the most awkward line in the piece.

To my ears, the music (in contrast, say, to Shostakovich's in The Sun Shines on the Motherland) manages to hold its own—although I'd have to say that it does so more successfully if you put down the texts and listen without them. Written in 1937, it's vintage Soviet-period Prokofiev, composed right after Romeo and Juliet and just before Alexander Nevsky. Not surprisingly, it shares more with the similarly propagandistic Nevsky than it does with Romeo. Certainly, the women's melody that soars above the chanting men in the second movement has that beauty-of-the-vast-steppes yearning we get in the more sentimentally nationalist moments in the later score; and the "Revolution" movement is a clear prototype for the "Battle on the Ice." And while the cantata has 10 movements and the concert version of Nevsky only seven, the two works have similar trajectories, moving from an ominous opening through a tremendous battle scene and a brief reflection on to a clangorous celebration. But the cantata makes Nevsky look tame. Indeed, in terms of sheer fire-power, it's Prokofiev's most extreme composition, featuring an eight-part chorus, a massive orchestra (16 woodwinds, 18 brass), an extra military band (more than a dozen brass players here), and an accordion group, not to mention extravagant percussion (including a siren), keyboard, and harps—all de-ployed, at the most dynamic moments, with a ferocity and textural density that looks back to the unflinching dissonances of the Second Symphony and The Fiery Angel.


It's not music for the faint of heart. In fact, for a variety of musical and political reasons, the work was not performed in its entirety for more than half a century (for details on its history, see my review of the Järvi performance and Daniel Morrison's of the Titov, Fanfare 16:4 and 40:1). But if you can take the ear-splitting onslaught, it is surprisingly—even surpassingly—uplifting: Anyone who tears up at the end of Nevsky or War and Peace will have a similar experience here. The effect is especially strong on this stunning new performance by Kirill Karabits, who charges through the music without a trace of apology. With superior work from his orchestra and chorus and first-rate engineering (maintaining clarity even in the most congested passages of the movement depicting the revolution), it's the kind of recording that overwhelms you, just as the music was intended to do. To my ears, it makes an even



stronger case for the work than any of the four predecessors I know, good as they are— Kondrashin's (with significant cuts), Järvi's, Titov's, and Elder's. Yes, those who insist that their CDs last more than an hour may find this short measure—but it's hard to think of anything that would be an appropriate filler (Järvi's selections from *The Stone Flower* are distinctly anti-climactic).

I wish there were a surround-sound version. Audite advertises the availability of a multi-channel download on the album jacket, but that's an error—while there's an excellent hi-res stereo download, the performance was recorded in two-channel only. With that small regret, this can be exuberantly recommended.



**PROKOFIEV *Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution*** • Kirill Karabits, cond; Ernst Senff Ch Berlin, Staatskapelle Weimar, Members of Luftwaffenmusikkorps Erfurt • AUDITE 97.754 (41:55 ) Live: Wiemarhalle, Weimar 8/23/2017

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