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

aud 97.754

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Fanfare (Huntley Dent - 2018.07.01)

As a celebration of noise, Prokofiev's Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of the October Revolution can be enjoyed; it's a kind of über film score to a movie that doesn't exist. There are harmless examples of glorified patriotism like Beethoven's Wellington's Victory (a huge success and money-earner for him) and Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture, written decades after the war. But propagandistic rum-tum from the Soviet era is darker. Like Shostakovich's Song of the Forests, a grand cantata celebrating Stalin's heroic accomplishments in dam-building, a fervent performance of Prokofiev's 1937 commemoration of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution—an event so glorious that the composer immediately ran westward as fast he could to get away—can raise the score above hackwork. It's baffling to me why conductors on the order of Valery Gergiev (on YouTube) and Yuri Temirkanov (Hour Classics and YouTube) are inspired to pay tribute to nationalistic bombast paid for in blood. By 1937 the ideals of the Revolution rang hollow, and the specter of totalitarian repression under Stalin had muted any cause for rejoicing.

Obedience is forced upon composers who have the misfortune to be trapped in authoritarian regimes, but Prokofiev wasn't one—he returned from exile voluntarily. Shostakovich had the heart and courage to stand up against anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union and to offer protection to the beleaguered Mieczysław Weinberg. Prokofiev, so far as I know, didn't confront repression, even though he personally knew people who had been vanished by the NKVD in the middle of the night. As a politically compliant composer he has a trove of boilerplate to his credit, including a cantata for the next 10-year celebration in 1947, which I haven't heard. (Shostakovich had written To October to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the October Revolution in 1927.)

Many will feel that this rousing live performance under the skilled Kirill Karabits is disqualified by its stingy total timing and lack of fillers. In a blow to toadying, Prokofiev's 10-part cantata met with official disapproval and wasn't premiered until 1966. There's a large percussion battering ram—I mean, battery—and the tunes are pitched to the tractor-driving classes. Among the eight-part chorus, which in this performance is very professional and not too large, the men are stout-hearted patriots and the women, too. For official occasions Prokofiev enjoyed being grandiose in his instrumentation, which on this occasion includes quadruple woodwinds and brass, the horns increased to eight. There's a military band with saxophones and extra brass, some accordions for folk flavor, alarm bells, cannons, sirens, and Lenin's voice orating through a megaphone (here undertaken by Karabits). Suddenly Wellington's Victory sounds like a minuet for recorders and lute.

Reviewing an earlier recording conducted by Aleksandr Titov in 2016, Daniel

Morrison considered the texts taken from Marx, Lenin, and Stalin. “I am not convinced by the suggestion in the notes for this recording that Prokofiev’s setting of these texts contains hidden meanings, that his treatment of them is ironic rather than fully committed. What does appear to me is that rather than praising the present, the work mostly looks back to the early history of the revolution, to a time when its promise to free mankind from bondage, to end exploitation, poverty, and imperialism, could still be taken seriously” (Fanfare 40:1). It’s a nonjudgmental judgment, but I doubt that Prokofiev had any illusions about the murderous extinction of those early ideals.

On musical grounds, which aren’t a major consideration, really, Karabits leads an effective charge, and I can recommend the performance to anyone who has a specific curiosity about this score on its own. The recorded sound is very good; final applause is included.

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 (Streaming audio: 41:55) Live: Wiemarhalle, Weimar 8/23/2017. https://www.naxosmusiclibrary.com/catalogue/item.asp?cid=Audite97.754

Cantata for the 20th Anniversary of October
Audio CD
Audite

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