

Notes on the Program

BY JAMES M. KELLER, NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC PROGRAM ANNOTATOR

Alexander Nevsky

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born

in Sontsovka (now called Krasnoye), Ukraine on either April 23 (according to his own report) or April 27 (as stated on his birth certificate), 1891

Died

in Nikolina Gora, near Moscow, on March 5, 1953

Work composed

1938, in Moscow, in a version for studio orchestra, to accompany the film *Alexander Nevsky* by Sergei Eisenstein (1898–1948). In 1939 Prokofiev revised the film score to create a stand-alone cantata which employs a full symphony orchestra; in this concert we hear William D. Brohn's 1987 reconstruction based on the film sound track and on Prokofiev's expanded orchestration.

World premiere

with the film's official release, on December 1, 1938, in Moscow

New York Philharmonic premiere

These are the first performances of the complete film score. The Orchestra first performed the cantata on December 18, 1945, at Madison Square Garden for the American Society for Russian Relief, Leopold Stokowski, conductor, Jennie Tourel, soloist, and the Westminster Choir; last played on April 6, 2002, Kurt Masur, conductor, Nancy Mauitsby, soloist, and the New York Choral Artists.

Estimated duration

ca. 110 minutes

The story related in the film *Alexander Nevsky* deals with a monumental confrontation between two powerful nations: Russia and Germany. The film itself was achieved through a monumental collaboration between two powerful artistic luminaries: the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein and the composer Sergei Prokofiev. It is Eisenstein's epic vision that stands at the heart of the work's conception and realization, but Prokofiev supported that vision to perfection, yielding one of the greatest collaborations between director and composer in the history of cinema.

At the end of the 1920s Eisenstein and Prokofiev were among the most internationally acclaimed Russian modernists in their respective fields. Ironically, neither of them was in Russia at the time — or, to look at it another way, the fact that they were both active outside their native land contributed to their fame.

Born in Riga, Latvia, in 1898, Eisenstein had gained renown through film masterpieces such as *Battleship Potemkin* and *October: Ten Days That Shook the World*. The latter caused him some troubles with Stalin's cultural authorities; after making some hurried, enforced changes to that film, the director left Russia in 1929, and began hobnobbing with the artistic elite of the European avant-garde, including the writers James Joyce, Jean Cocteau, and Gertrude Stein, and the film director Abel Ganz. In May 1930 Eisenstein proceeded to the United States, where he steeped himself in Hollywood's latest moviemaking technology, including the rapidly developing methods of sound pictures. In February 1931 Stalin, fearing that

The Work at a Glance

Prokofiev's score for Eisenstein's *Alexander Nevsky* is notable not only for its intrinsic power, but for the way it so viscerally underscores the narrative that is being projected on the screen. Following are some of the scenes in which this marriage of music and action are most effective, identified by the movement titles used in Prokofiev's cantata based on his film score.

I. **Russia under the Mongolian Yoke:** An orchestral evocation of the desolation and gloom of the Russian people during the brutal Mongolian invasion. Eisenstein used these words of description: "Woeful traces of the ravages wrought on Russia by the Mongols — heaps of human bones, swords, rusty lances. Fields overgrown with weeds and ruins of buried villages."

II. **Song about Alexander Nevsky:** A tranquil lake scene in which Alexander and his friends fish with nets, and peasants sing of his earlier military successes against the Swedes and of the Russians' determination to overcome all invaders.

III. **The Crusaders in Pskov:** The town of Pskov has fallen. The conquerors — representatives of the Western form of Christianity — threaten to burn anyone who fails to convert to their religion. They execute leading citizens and throw small children onto the pyre, while the crusaders and their priests chant.

IV. **Arise, Ye Russian People:** A stirring, heroic call to battle, sung by the Novgorod peasants marching off to war. The melody of the contrasting middle section — almost folklike in its directness — becomes the single most important motif of the film score.

V. **The Battle on the Ice:** The longest movement, this is a virtuosic musical depiction of the battle. Although it is April, Lake Chudskoye is still frozen solid, The crusaders' battle chant is heard softly on the trombone. Then the hoofbeats of the Teutonic horses on the ice become audible: the tuba hints at the brutal power of the attacking forces.

The two armies meet. The invaders have the weight and armor, but the Russians hold their ground. Alexander challenges his counterpart to single combat and defeats him. The battle changes course, and the peasants' folklike march begins to dominate the action.

Then the spring sunshine causes the ice to crack under the invaders' heavy armor; most of the enemy sinks to its death. The battle is over; the astonished peasants look out at what little remains of the enemy, as the orchestra plays a poignant phrase from the fourth movement.

VI. **The Field of the Dead:** Night is falling. Many Russians lie dead or wounded. Nearby, a young woman — who has vowed to marry whichever of two suitors has proved the bravest in battle — sings of her search for her brave lovers. Both men, though injured, are alive, and she helps them off the field.



VII. **Alexander's Entry into Pskov:**

The victory is complete. Alexander's troops return to Pskov in triumph, bringing their captives with them. Weddings are arranged, the dead are mourned, the traitors are punished. Everyone celebrates the end of the fighting with a choral paean.

— The Editors

Nikolai Cherkassov as Alexander in
"The Battle on the Ice"

Eisenstein might decide to emigrate, ordered him to return home.

Prokofiev, too, had been away, but for a much longer time than had the director. The composer had left abruptly in 1918, just as the Russian Revolution was overturning life as he knew it, and he spent 14 years touring (as a piano virtuoso), conducting, and composing in the West, principally in Paris and in the United States.

He, like Eisenstein, wended his way back to his homeland. In 1932 he began to divide his time between Paris and Moscow, and by 1936 he settled in Moscow for good. He explained:

Foreign air does not suit my inspiration because I am a Russian, and that is to say, the least suited of men to be an exile, to remain myself in a psychological climate that isn't of my race.

At that time foreign influence was generally considered a blemish on the records of returning Soviet citizens, so both Eisenstein and Prokofiev found that they had to negotiate a path bounded by encouragement on one side and suspicion on the other.

With these two phenomenal creative artists back under his control, Stalin had set up his chessboard so that he could extend an offer neither could refuse. The Third Reich was growing dangerous, and Soviet politicians were trying to mobilize anti-German sentiment among the Russian populace. Eisenstein responded knowingly when, in 1937, cultural authorities came his way, dangling a commission for an epic historical film celebrating an incident from medieval Russian history: Alexander Nevsky's 1242 victory over the marauding Knights of the Teutonic Order, a triumph that served to unify the Russian nation (at least for a while). This struck everyone as a terrific idea, a way to symbolize the military superiority of the Russians over the Germans while ever-so-slightly veiling the issue across a divide of 700 years.

The Score for this Performance

I first heard Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* cantata when I was a cellist in the American Symphony Orchestra under Leopold Stokowski. As a Russian major at Columbia University I saw the film itself at Manhattan's Thalia movie house, and felt that I was experiencing a film score that was not background music, but a work in which the music is as important as the picture. *Alexander Nevsky* was constructed based on that idea, and the result is the best film score ever written.

Listening to a typical print of *Nevsky*, however, is diminished by the 1938 optical sound track, which sounds terrible, and the very small size of the studio orchestra and its poor quality. There were many challenges to offering the film for optimal performance: in addition to locating a good print of the film (involving an unflinching campaign of letters and calls with Moscow film archivists), there was the matter of determining what the musicians would play. The original film score and parts — written for a small studio orchestra using recording techniques that were not yet fully developed — wouldn't sound effective in a concert hall. The composer's own transcription for full symphony orchestra, the *Alexander Nevsky* cantata, is a condensation of the complete sound track, cutting repeated musical ideas that work only with the film. William D. Brohn painstakingly reworked the score, putting back the cuts that Prokofiev had made for the cantata, but applying to them the composer's symphonic orchestration.

I like to think that what you are seeing is the restoration of a great masterpiece, what Prokofiev had in his head when he saw the extraordinary images that Eisenstein had created. We've reconstructed the score so that great orchestras such as the New York Philharmonic can perform it and so we can hear, finally, this great film.

— John Goberman, Producer

The subject was just the thing for a big-screen historical epic, and of course it would have to be a sound film — Eisenstein's first, strange to say, despite his long-standing interest in that domain. Prokofiev leapt to participate when he was approached to write the score. The film was produced in the astonishingly brief period of five months, and was greeted rapturously when it was

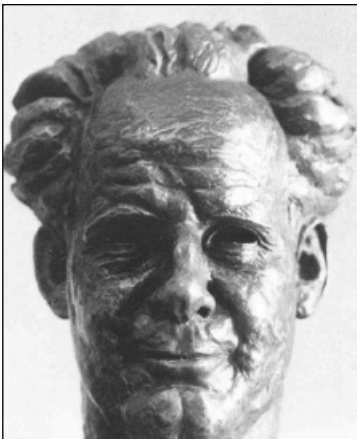
released, in December 1938. Eisenstein so redeemed himself that the film earned him the Order of Lenin in 1939.

Still, the Soviet authorities withdrew *Alexander Nevsky* from distribution that same year, when Stalin signed a non-aggression treaty with Hitler. Given the national friendship that agreement signified, the film suddenly seemed too anti-German.

In the Collaborators' Words:

Eisenstein and Prokofiev left extensive, always respectful, writings about their collaboration on *Alexander Nevsky*:

Eisenstein on Prokofiev:



Fredda Brilliant's "sculpture portrait" of Eisenstein

The Prokofiev of our time is ... a man of the screen in the special sense which makes it possible for the screen to reveal not only the appearances and subjects of objects, but also, and particularly, their special inner structure.... Having grasped this structural secret of all phenomena, he clothes it in the tonal camera angles of instrumentation, compelling it to gleam with shifts in timbre, and forces the whole inflexible structure to blossom into the emotional fullness of orchestration.

Prokofiev and I always haggle over the question of "who is to be first," in other words, whether the music should be written from the separate sequences and the montage done according to the music, or whether a whole scene should be edited first and the music for it written afterwards. We haggle because the one who is "first" has the hardest job to do — to create the rhythmic progression of the scene. The second one "has it easy." He has "only" to erect an adequate structure out of the materials, possibilities, and elements of his own medium.

However, once the Germans broke the non-aggression pact and invaded Russia, the film was promptly re-released.

Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and bass clarinet, tenor saxophone, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba,

timpani, triangle, snare drum, tambourine, maracas, wood block, cymbals, bass drum, tam-tam, orchestra bells, xylophone, timbales, tom-tom, steel plate, a mixture of sampled bell sounds, chimes (including extra large chimes), tuned bell plates, harp, organ, and strings, with a solo mezzo-soprano singer and four-part mixed chorus.

Mutual Admiration

Prokofiev on Eisenstein:

We always invited [Eisenstein] to be present during the final recording, and he never failed to contribute in some way to improving the quality of the recording by pointing out some detail that required highlighting, some dramatic effect that had to be emphasized. His respect for music was so great that at times he was prepared to cut or add to his sequences so as not to upset the balance of a musical episode.

As Eisenstein and I were viewing a piece of the film at the studio, he made suggestions concerning the music. His suggestions were often very graphically expressed. He would say, "Here it should sound as if a baby was being snatched from its mother's arms," or "I want it to be like a cork dragged against glass." I would go home and compose the music in strict accordance with the number of seconds that particular scene allowed me.... If the representation coincided with the music and no further changes were needed, I would begin orchestrating the piece.



Listen for ...

One of the most famous sequences in all of cinema, the climactic scene of “**The Battle on the Ice**” owes much of its effect to the hand in glove melding of sights and sounds. This lengthy set piece is a tone poem of sorts, opening with a depiction of the sun rising above the frigid mists of Lake Chudskoye (edgy strings, playing *pianissimo*). Then the Teutonic invaders approach on their galloping steeds: there’s some fascinating orchestration here – tuba sounding the melody from the depths of the orchestra, then handing it off to the saxophone and horn, all against the relentless eighth notes of the surrounding instruments:

Allegro moderato



The musical score is written in bass clef with a key signature of two sharps (D major) and a 4/4 time signature. It is marked *Allegro moderato*. The tuba part begins with a *sola* dynamic and a *mp* (mezzo-piano) dynamic. The saxophone and horn part enters with a *mp* dynamic and features a melodic line with accents and a final note with a staccato mark.

The Teutonic Knights chant as they advance, and the clamor grows deafening. An energetic fanfare: a counterattack by the Russian defense:

Allegro



The musical score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major) and a 2/2 time signature. It is marked *Allegro*. The horns and trumpets play a fanfare starting with a *f* (forte) dynamic. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes with accents.

The Russians sound light of foot compared to the Germans, and gradually the Russian themes overwhelm the German ones – thrillingly so. The Teutonic Knights are routed, and suddenly the ice gives way as immense scales sweep up and down through the orchestra. The marauders sink to their frigid finale, leaving onlookers to gaze at the frozen landscape.



A moment from the scene in Alexander Nevsky depicting “The Battle on the Ice”