

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

Sergei Prokofiev

Sergei 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. However, his involvement with the genre was even longer than that – covering 50 years – since he had produced a Symphony in G major 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.

Even while working on another symphony, in 1902, Prokofiev was already developing strong opinions about the genre, which he articulated in a letter to his friend and fellow 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. This is 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 his Second and Third both run about 35 minutes; his Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth between 40 and 45 (the Fifth being the longest of his symphonies); and his Seventh a bit more than a half hour. Nonetheless, Prokofiev could not be accused of sprawl as his symphonies unrolled; as he aged, he never lost his command of writing compactly.

World War II was in full swing while Prokofiev worked on this symphony during the summer of 1944, but he was sheltered from it, living in an artists' retreat 150 miles northeast of Moscow. "I regard the Fifth Symphony as the culmination of a long period in my creative life," he wrote shortly after its premiere,

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 so than in the epic vision of its spectacular coda. A fast

In Short

Born: April 23, 1891 (so he claimed, though his birth certificate said April 27), in Sontsovska, Ekaterinoslav district, Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow

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

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

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

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: December 4, 2007, Gustavo Dudamel, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 43 minutes

movement follows, so full of hilarity and satire that it proves to be 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 returning to his native land following his years as an expatriate from 1918 to 1936; it was accordingly 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*. Its wide-ranging but overwhelmingly optimistic spirit combined with the circumstances of wartime patriotism to create a perfect storm of enthusiasm on Soviet stages, and it wasted no

time in whipping up similar excitement in the United States. On November 19, 1945, a week after Serge Koussevitzky led the American premiere with the Boston Symphony, Prokofiev's picture graced the cover of *Time* magazine, and 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.

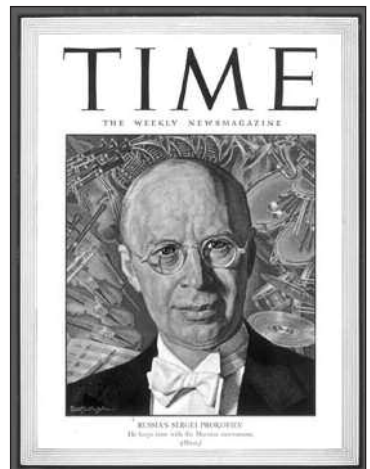
Instrumentation: two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets plus E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tambourine, snare drum, wood block, bass drum, tam-tam, piano, harp,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

Portions of this note originally appeared in the program books of the San Francisco Symphony and UBS-Verbier Youth Orchestra. © James M. Keller

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:

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.



Cover of *Time* magazine, November 19, 1945