

Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

Symphony No. 1 in D major, Op. 25, *Classical*

Sergei Prokofiev

In 1891, when Prokofiev was born in an obscure Ukrainian village, much of Europe was gearing up to commemorate the centennial of Mozart's death. By the time the 1991 Mozart bicentennial rolled around, not to mention the celebrations in 2006 of the 250th anniversary of his birth, the exhaustive deification of the composer had reached a magnitude that would scarcely have been imagined a century earlier. Mozart was unquestionably respected by late-19th-century audiences, and certain of his works were performed with some regularity. Especially the "Romantic" or "demonic" Mozart — say, *Don Giovanni* and the minor-key piano concertos — still enjoyed currency in the repertoire. But by and large it was not an age much attuned to the Classicism of Mozart and Haydn.

In Russia, adulation of Mozart was an exception rather than the rule, and young Russian composers-in-training were rarely counseled to study the Viennese Classicists as models of style, as they are today. Prokofiev's conducting professor at the St. Petersburg Conservatory, Nikolai Tcherepnin, was a contrarian in this regard who encouraged his students to immerse themselves in the works of Haydn and Mozart to see what wisdom they could extract for their own compositions.

A particularly happy result of the exercise was Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1, meticulously worked out in 1916–17, and premiered the following year, just before the composer left his politically explosive homeland for an extended residence in America and Western Europe. (The year of the *Classical* Symphony's composition was also the year of the Czar's abdication, the October Revolution, and Le-

nin's ascent to political power.) The symphony would earn an enduring spot in the orchestral repertoire as a compact masterpiece, and in the history books as a forebear of the widespread neoclassicism of the 1920s.

Prokofiev later explained that his intent in the *Classical* Symphony was to translate musical classicism into a specifically 20th-century idiom:

It seemed to me that if Haydn had lived into this era, he would have kept his own style while absorbing things from what was new in music. That's the kind of symphony I wanted to write: a symphony in the Classical style.

His decision to give the work its familiar nickname seems to have derived from two impetuses: on one hand, it is a logical reference to its sources; on the other, the composer

In Short

Born: April 23, 1891, in Sontsovka, in the Ekaterinoslav district of Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow, USSR

Work composed: 1916–17, completed on September 10 of the latter year

World premiere: April 21, 1918, in Petrograd (aka St. Petersburg), with the composer conducting the Petrograd Court Orchestra

New York Philharmonic premiere: March 14, 1929, Arturo Toscanini, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: November 27, 2004, David Robertson, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 14 minutes

explained that he “secretly hoped that in the course of time it might itself turn out to be a classic.”

As it happens, this was also the first major work Prokofiev composed without the intermediary of the piano keyboard. A superb pianist, he had previously found it natural to sound out his harmonies at the instrument, but as he later recalled:

I had noticed that thematic material composed without the piano was often better in quality. When transferred to the piano, it sounds strange for a moment, but after a few repetitions it seems that this is exactly the way it should have been written. I was intrigued with the idea of writing an entire symphonic piece without the piano. A composition written this way would probably have more transparent orchestral colors.

Indeed, the *Classical* Symphony is as transparent as a finely cut diamond. The

work is set in the popular “sunny” 18th-century key of D major, and it employs the standard forces of a classical chamber orchestra. Following the model of Mozart and Haydn, Prokofiev cast it in four movements; but each is so compact that the entire symphony adds up to only about 15 minutes — far shorter than most symphonies of Mozart’s and Haydn’s maturity. Of course, Prokofiev builds on his models in original ways. The opening *Allegro*, for example, may bustle through a Classically precise sonata form (though without a repeat of the opening exposition), but it’s filled with a crisp irony that evokes later Prokofiev just as easily as it does Haydn.

Instrumentation: two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings.

This essay is derived from a note originally written for the San Francisco Symphony and is used with permission. © James M. Keller

Classical becomes a Classic



Prokofiev in New York, 1918

Prokofiev’s wish that this symphony “might itself turn out to be a classic” came true — and quickly. Today it is one of the most frequently performed and recorded of all 20th-century compositions. The third-movement Gavotte proved especially popular, and Prokofiev pressed it into later service by expanding it substantially and inserting it into his *Romeo and Juliet* ballet score. He also arranged the Gavotte for piano and performed it often, even recording the arrangement in 1935, leaving a unique “creator’s document” of an exquisite, if Lilliputian, masterpiece. As it happens, it is in this movement that Prokofiev departs most decisively from his models, writing a duple-time Gavotte instead of the triple-time minuet that almost always graced symphonies of the Classical era.