The twentieth-century was an era of artistic marvel and change. The arts, especially music, exploded and produced innumerable new styles and practices. It was a creative revolution. This revolution, however, was quashed in the newly founded nation of the USSR. Joseph Stalin, the leader of the soviet state, and his ideological followers mercilessly dissected the creative output of every composer in the USSR, forcing them to write in a manner that aligned with socialist philosophies. The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years by Simon Morrison is an enthralling 363-page chronicle of the works composed by Sergey Prokofiev after his return to Soviet Russia and how he survived the impossible constraints of soviet musical culture—both as a composer and as an individual.

Morrison begins his scholarly monograph by tackling one of Prokofiev’s most perplexing decisions—choosing to abandon Paris, France and return to the USSR. Prokofiev had taken up residence in the hub of musical and artistic development, France. Why then would he consider leaving, knowing the hardships faced by soviet composers? In short, Morrison convincingly shows Prokofiev was baited and lured to return by the Deputy People’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs, Vladimir Potyomkin. In 1935, Soviet Russia was in dire need of internationally renowned artists and musicians to ameliorate its cultural standing in the world. Potyomkin gave the same offer to several other prominent Russian-born composers, such as Igor Stravinsky. However, Prokofiev was the only one to accept. Potyomkin filled Prokofiev’s head with images of endless commissions, performances, exquisite housing, and permission to freely travel.
on international tours. Some of Potyomkin’s promises had already began to bare fruit that year in Soviet Russia, making 1935, according to Morrison, “one of the most lucrative [years] of his [Prokofiev’s] career” (29).

Having prefaced Prokofiev’s Soviet years, Morrison then delves into an examination of the entirety of Prokofiev’s soviet compositions in eight chapters, each dealing with a specific time period or theme. The first three chapters of the book concentrate on Prokofiev’s works written in the five year period after his return to Soviet Russia. Some of Prokofiev’s major pieces produced during this period include his operas Semyon Kotko, Eugene Onegin, the film score for The Queen of Spades, and the famously controversial Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of October.

Prokofiev wrote the Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of October in an attempt to bolster his political standing, after several artistic miscalculations on his part (namely the disastrous production of the ballet Romeo and Juliet) saw it denigrated. The Cantata was originally conceived as a tribute to Vladimir Lenin, one of the leaders of the Red Revolution. While composing, Prokofiev daringly allowed the Cantata to evolve into a veneration of the Revolution, Joseph Stalin and the liberation of the populace from the tyrannical Tsars. Prokofiev’s provocative decision to set excerpts from speeches given both by Lenin and Stalin in the Cantata ultimately damned it, and in the apt words of Morrison, “cast a long shadow over Prokofiev’s career” (54). In an article co-authored by Morrison a few years earlier, he speculates on an ulterior motive for Prokofiev writing the Cantata. According to Morrison and Nelly Kravets, “[Prokofiev] hoped to inspire a musical revolution, one that would enhance the technical sophistication of proletarian musicmaking.”

Chapters four to six deal with Prokofiev’s output after the outbreak of World War II and his elopement with the young poet Mira Mendelson. Prokofiev abruptly left his legal wife, Lina Prokofiev, and his two sons to live in Moscow with Mira. She played a vital role in Prokofiev’s professional and personal life. She was skilled in translating foreign texts into Russian and had a talent for writing libretti. Several of Prokofiev’s dramatic works, such as his operas War and Peace I and II and A Story of a Real Man, are based on libretti provided by Mira. The highlight of this section of the book was chapter five, where Morrison critically examines the creative collaboration between Prokofiev and the film producer Sergei Eisenstein. Morrison discusses two of the duo’s collaborative efforts, the films Alexander Nevsky and parts I and II of Ivan the Terrible.

Alexander Nevsky was Eisenstein’s attempt to restore his unstable career. Living with the title of formalist over his head because of a previous project, Eisenstein sought desperately for a way to ameliorate his status. He found this in the form of Prokofiev

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and the film scenario to *Alexander Nevsky*. The film recounts the ousting of Teutonic Knights from the ancient Russian city of Novgorod by the prince and titular character, Alexander Nevsky. Morrison discusses in great detail the musical choices and techniques used by Prokofiev in his film score, such as his use of tonic chords with incomplete sonorities and use of period instruments. Prokofiev’s decision to parody Igor Stravinsky’s 1930 *Symphony of Psalms* in this work was especially appealing and satisfyingly humorous. Prokofiev took the Latin text sung by the teutonic knights in their choruses directly from Stravinsky’s work. According to Morrison, Prokofiev enjoyed toying with his then Paris-based rival (229). Curiously, Morrison makes no mention of the modal harmonies and melodies used by Prokofiev in his music. Douglas W. Gallez discusses these at some length and ascribes them to several crucial scenes in the film. Morrison’s failure to describe these distinctive musical qualities is rather perplexing and conspicuous, considering the usual depth and scope of his musical analyses. Eisenstein’s and Prokofiev’s combined efforts ultimately resulted in Eisenstein winning a Stalin Prize, one of the highest accolades in Soviet Russia.

The last two chapters of the book deal with Prokofiev’s tragic fall from grace and his final days. One of the focal points of these chapters is the 1948 Resolution brought about by the Union of Soviet Composers. Headed by Andrey Zhdanov, the Resolution attacked and denounced numerous composers deemed by the union to be tainted by, so called formalist tendencies. It named Dmitri Shostakovich, Aram Khachaturyan, Prokofiev and several other significant composers as agents of the formalist movement. This act had severe ramifications for each of the composers’ careers and lives, especially Prokofiev. He lost a vast sum of his income as his commissions dried up, and subsequently, sunk quickly into debt. This exacerbated his already failing health, as he had already suffered a crippling fall and a debilitating stroke. Each of the composers responded publicly, some in a more resigned fashion than others. Prokofiev very humbly apologized and publicly acknowledged his formalist tendencies in his apologies. He promised to strive to write music that more closely aligned itself with the Soviet Party ideologies, stating his intent to aim for “clear musical speech that shall be acceptable to [his] people.”

Prokofiev tried and failed. His futile attempt to clear his name came in the form of his opera, *A Story of a Real Man*. Based on a novella of the same name, the opera follows the life of a soviet World War II pilot who loses the use of his legs after being gunned down. After being saved by peasants and rehabilitated in a city hospital, he returns to

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the skies to continue the fight for his people. At the pre-screening of the opera, Prokofiev was once again denounced and harshly attacked for his work. An editorial published in Sovetskaya Musica, a soviet music magazine of the time, savagely tore into Prokofiev and his opera. The author of the editorial was disgusted by the dramatic work’s “Chaos, coarse naturalism, complete absence of melody... [and] harmonic muddiness.”

Leonid Entelis, a musicologist present at the screening, exclaimed with nefarious delight, “Prokofiev is no longer, Prokofiev is finished!” (330)

The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years is more a critical analysis and chronicle of the works by Prokofiev during his soviet years than a linear biography. Each chapter deals with Prokofiev’s works written during a certain time period, or in the case of the Eisenstein films, works that adhere to a certain theme. He begins each segment on a work by explaining its historical background and context. He then moves to discussing its conception and writing. Morrison then follows this with a thorough musical analysis of the composition in question, albeit without any musical examples. He also discusses the music itself and the relationship it has with the plot of the work (when relevant). He then finishes off each the segment by discussing the piece’s success, or more often its failure.

Morrison incorporates a variety of sources, including books, articles, journals, and diaries. He relies heavily on Mira Mendelson’s memoirs from chapter four onwards, using them as a primary source when discussing Prokofiev’s life and his compositional processes. Moreover, Morrison according to his book’s acknowledgements, drew sources from numerous Russian federal archives such as the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art and the Russian State Archive of Social-Political History.

The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years is a very well written and clearly organized scholarly monograph. However, it does have some crippling drawbacks. Chief among these in my opinion was the lack of actual musical examples. Morrison spends a great deal of time discussing and analysing Prokofiev’s music; he describes the entire harmonic layout of scenes and goes into great detail about the relationships between the music and the theatrical elements. His analyses are very compelling, but the lack of musical examples makes it rather difficult at times to fully grasp the relationships he suggests. Andrew Wachtel, in his review of this very same book from The Slavic and East European Journal, shares my sentiments—even going so far as to

remark that the lack of musical examples “will make it of limited use for serious musicologists.”

Throughout the book, Morrison frequently references Christian Science when discussing Prokofiev’s personal life. Morrison’s failure to explicitly define or explain Christian Science is a serious pitfall that will hinder readers without prior knowledge of the topic. He claims it was a driving force in the lives of both Prokofiev’s and his first wife Lina’s, yet offers no further details or explanations on the subject. I would have thoroughly enjoyed an investigation into Prokofiev’s spiritual life, as is it one of the facets most rarely discussed in relation to composers’ lives, generally speaking. Leon Botstein in his essay “Beyond Death and Evil: Prokofiev’s Spirituality and Christian Science,” delves into and explains Christian Science and Prokofiev’s intimate relationship with it. According to Botstein, Christian Science is an ideological belief system in which the spirit and mind are the sole “constituents of reality.”

Prokofiev first dabbled with Christian Science in his youth, using it to remedy his conceited, arrogant and narcissistic behaviour. One could speculate that during his later and more trying years, Prokofiev would have turned even more to his faith for solace and relief. Perhaps Prokofiev even drew inspiration for some of his works from his faith. The apparent importance of this belief system to Prokofiev therefore moves me to question why Morrison chose not to expand upon this significant facet of Prokofiev’s life.

Andrew Wachtel, in his aforementioned review of Morrison’s book, offers a very harsh critique. He claims “the book itself is often a frustrating read...because it is ultimately unclear who its implied reader is supposed to be.”

I wholly disagree with this viewpoint. Taking into consideration the very rich and sophisticated prose, the numerous archival historical and musical references, and the in-depth musical analyses, this book is without a doubt intended for music scholars with a vested interest in Prokofiev or the machinations of the musical society in Soviet Russia. I also disagree with another statement made by Wachtel. He claims “the casual reader interested in Russian music will be hard pressed to read this as it assumes a detailed knowledge of Prokofiev’s life before 1936.” Although I hold Prokofiev and his music in high regard, I knew precious little about his life before 1936. I did not, however, find this book at all

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8 Ibid.
difficult to read and follow, as Morrison rarely (if ever) references events that happened outside the scope of his book.

The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years, written by Simon Morrison, is an enthralling and insightful study of Sergey Prokofiev’s soviet output and his fight to survive the vicious politics of musical society in Soviet Russia. Morrison, through tactful and elegant prose, delivers an abundance of historical facts concerning Prokofiev’s soviet years and compositional output. He also offers very thorough musical analyses of all of Prokofiev’s major works, although his lack of musical examples sometimes makes these difficult to understand. Morrison’s book is an invaluable addition to the field of Prokofiev scholarship. Arlo Mackinnion in her review of Morrison’s book aptly states, “The People’s Artist unequivocally is, and will remain the definitive study of Prokofiev’s later years.”98 I am very much inclined to agree.

For Further Reading:


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