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In Composing for the Red Screen: Prokofiev and Soviet Film Kevin Bartig examines Sergei Prokofiev’s film scores from the few years leading up to and the many years following his repatriation to Russia. Bartig compellingly argues that although film music work comprised a substantial portion of Prokofiev’s income and occupied much of his time after the early 1930s, scholars tend to overlook Prokofiev’s compositions for Soviet films, such as Lieutenant Kizhe, Alexander Nevsky, and Ivan the Terrible, in favour of his work for orchestra, voice, and piano. In 177 pages Bartig examines a relatively untouched part of a prolific composer’s oeuvre, using resources made available only in recent years. The result is an analysis of the composer's involvement in film that is comprehensive. Bartig’s research considers the ideas and intentions explored in some of the composer’s most popular scores, touching upon Prokofiev’s enthusiasm toward new recording technologies and techniques and the stress of composing during the mass relocation in the wake of the Nazi invasion of Russia. Additionally Bartig explores the relationships Prokofiev formed with directors and producers of his films, especially Sergei Eisenstein, with whom Prokofiev created Nevsky and Ivan. Of particular interest to me was Bartig’s in-depth discussion of one of Prokofiev’s unreleased film scores for an adaptation of Alexander Pushkin’s novella, Queen of Spades. Some context is given regarding Prokofiev’s life during his time spent working on the films, however, Composing for the Red Screen is by no means a biographical account of the composer’s life.
in Soviet Russia. Readers are expected to have previous knowledge of the story of Sergei Prokofiev and of Stalin's Russia to absorb the entirety of Bartig's account of Prokofiev's film career.

The six main sections of Composing for the Red Screen are arranged in chronological order. Sections one, two, and six each focus on one film for which Prokofiev composed a score. Sections three and four depict Prokofiev's collaboration with Sergei Eisenstein on Alexander Nevsky and the events leading up to it, and section five encapsulates all of Prokofiev's film work following his evacuation to Eastern Russia during the war with Germany.

Bartig begins with an extensive analysis of Prokofiev's first film work for Lieutenant Kizhe with Alexander Fayntsimmer and Yuri Tinyanov. Bartig includes a synopsis of the amusing story of Kizhe, in which a scribe for Tsar Pavel I mistakenly writes "Poruchik kizhe" (meaning Lieutenant Kizhe) instead of "Poruchiki zhe" ("and the lieutenants"), causing Pavel to believe in a non-existent lieutenant. Pavel's army exploits the Tsar's confusion. In doing so, they force the imaginary soldier to be sent into exile in Siberia and eventually bring him back to become a general (14). The chapter also describes Prokofiev's desire to develop a "New Simplicity" in his music. Prokofiev wanted to move away from an extensive use of atonality and dissonance, writing, "I intend to aim at a clear musical speech that shall be acceptable to my people." In his general analysis of the music Prokofiev composed for Kizhe, Bartig engagingly depicts the composer's change in attitude toward composition.

In the following section Bartig tackles the Queen of Spades, an unreleased film for which Prokofiev composed a full score. In 1937 the Soviet Union celebrated the centenary of the death of Russian novelist Alexander Pushkin by organizing a jubilee in the novelist's honour. Many artists had difficulty completing projects for the jubilee. For example, as Clive Bennett explains, the Soviet Committee of the Arts had Eugene Onegin, an opera Prokofiev worked on for the celebration, cancelled. According to Bennett, the Committee felt Prokofiev's rendering "violated Pushkin's poem." This was the climate that Queen of Spades was born into, and in which it died.

Queen of Spades was an adaptation of a Pushkin novella about a man, Herman, who seeks a secret, winning hand of cards. Filming never finished, although Prokofiev completed a 24-piece score. Along with a detailed history of the production and subsequent cancellation of the film, Bartig includes a thorough musical analysis of Prokofiev's score, which helps to explain how Prokofiev musically differentiated his Herman from the Herman of Tchaikovsky's operatic reworking of the novella. While Tchaikovsky's lyrical Herman theme portrays a man "waffling between Romantic

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lovesickness and desire for fortune,” Prokofiev’s is an illustration of an “obsessive character whose music captures the invariability of his thoughts” (48). Bartig’s fascinating account of Queen of Spades sheds light on a project explored in few other scholarly texts on Prokofiev.

In the same chapter Bartig includes a terse rationalization for Prokofiev’s repatriation to Russia, citing influences of the composer’s colleagues coupled with the worry of losing Soviet commissions, which provided much of Prokofiev’s income at the time. Bartig would do well to expand on the reasons for such a significant decision in Prokofiev’s life. David Nice cites Prokofiev’s dwindling support from the American concert scene and the prospect of staging his ballet of Romeo and Juliet at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow as factors that influenced Prokofiev’s decision to return home. At the same time, film had become essential to Soviet propaganda. Jamie Miller explains that film was a means to educate the proletariat on Soviet ideals and could circumvent the problem of illiteracy in the Union. Miller also states that Soviet filmmakers received more funding than the other arts because of the vital role of film in Soviet propaganda. Considering Prokofiev’s interest in film, the idea of lucrative Soviet projects must have seemed enticing. Bartig’s analysis would benefit from discussing these issues and their relationship to Prokofiev’s repatriation.

The third and fourth sections of Bartig’s text discuss Prokofiev’s 1938 trip to America — his last excursion outside the Soviet Union — and, upon his return to the Soviet Union, his first collaboration with the film director Sergei Eisenstein on Alexander Nevsky. On this final American tour, Prokofiev was treated to a screening of Disney’s Snow White and the Seven Dwarves, a film he enjoyed so much, writes Elizabeth Bergman, that he arranged to see it again the next day. During the same tour Prokofiev met with Walt Disney himself, and Prokofiev performed his Peter and the Wolf for him in the hopes the story and music might be used in a future Disney film. Unfortunately, Prokofiev had no further involvement with the adaptation of Peter and the Wolf for Disney, Bartig’s work here is brief but presents an intriguing idea of what Prokofiev’s life and work may have looked like had he left the Soviet Union for work abroad.


5 Miller, Soviet Cinema, 104.

Bartig next provides a thorough study of Prokofiev’s work on *Alexander Nevsky*. Prokofiev’s collaborations with Sergei Eisenstein (on *Nevsky*, and later on *Ivan the Terrible*) were some of the most lucrative of his film career. *Nevsky*, which depicts the defeat of Teutonic knights by Prince Alexander during their thirteenth-century invasion of Novgorod, was the first film that saw Prokofiev work so closely with a director, his prior film music having been written based only on guidance via telegrams or occasional meetings with filmmakers. I found Bartig’s detailed account of how Prokofiev composed music for the Teutonic knights particularly insightful. Originally, Prokofiev had thought to compose according to the thirteenth-century Catholic style, but concluded the sound would be too foreign to movie-goers and decided to compose in a more current style that still gave the impression of old Catholic music. Although lauded, Douglas Gallez argues that Prokofiev’s music during the climactic battle between the Russians and the Holy Roman invaders falls quite short. Gallez writes that the accompanying music for the Russians is “simplistic, even embarrassing,” and that sound effects during the battle fall to a silent film-era trope of music imitating sound effects. Bartig would have done well to address this, but nonetheless creates a strong argument for the merit of Prokofiev’s work on *Nevsky*.

Section five of *Composing for the Red Screen* is a thin investigation of Prokofiev’s wartime film work. Unfortunately, this portion of the text falls short when measured against Bartig’s other chapters. In June of 1941 the Nazis invaded the Soviet Union, and people of high cultural status were evacuated from Soviet capitals and regions close to the war front. Many soviet film studios and composers, including Prokofiev, were relocated to more eastern regions of the Union, primarily around Kazakhstan.

Bartig’s discussion of films such as *Lermontov*, *Kotovsky*, and *Tonya* are very brief in comparison to other analyses in his book. Indeed, Bartig glosses over an especially intriguing film, *Kotovsky*. As Simon Morrison notes, *Kotovsky* is a story about Soviet citizens learning about “the Leninist concept of justified warfare.” Before the Second World War, Prokofiev refrained from working on films that were overtly political. After the outbreak of war, Prokofiev seems to have changed his mind and taken on projects in hopes of rallying the nation. Prokofiev promoted national pride by eliciting revolutionary sentiments with the music of *Kotovsky*. Harlow Robinson explains that Prokofiev references the French revolutionary anthem “La Marseillaise” and the Polish

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“Varshavianka” in his music for the film. Bartig sidesteps this discussion in his own work, an unfortunate lacuna for the reader, though he does tell the story of Tonya, an unreleased film in which the titular character, Tonya, a girl with a “steely resolve,” gives her life, staying in her town to call in a bombing raid while Germans invade (125). Bartig’s inclusion of Tonya lends strength to his work on Prokofiev’s wartime film composition, but richer information about this time in the artist’s life can be gathered from other sources, particularly Simon Morrison’s The People’s Artist: Prokofiev’s Soviet Years. Bartig seems to rely somewhat heavily on Morrison’s work on the subject, and the depth of already extant work on this period may be the reason for Bartig’s sparse writings here, but compared to the rest of his book, the wartime section comes across as inadequate. Readers interested in this part of Prokofiev’s life may look to the writings of others like Morrison and Robinson for greater information.

The final section of Bartig’s book covers Prokofiev’s second collaboration with Eisenstein, on Ivan the Terrible Parts I and II. A third part was planned but never came to fruition. Work on the project began during the evacuation in Alma-Ata, a city in current Kazakhstan in which the Soviet film studios Lenfilm and Mosfilm resided for the duration of the Second World War, but most of the music was written in Moscow. The film’s plot follows the tyrannical reign of Tsar Ivan IV, who united a vast array of multiple cultures by suppressing opponents, especially the boyars, with brute force. This portion of the text again demonstrates the great depth of research Bartig conducted for most of his text, with an exhaustive dissection of the work that went into the film. The section is rich with musical examples and analyses of music and lyrics of many pieces used in the film.

Bartig sometimes does not provide enough information about Prokofiev’s life to properly contextualize his music. The beginning of the first section references letters Prokofiev sent to friends and family on a trip to the United States in which the composer talks about the comfortable weather, mentions prospects for work in Hollywood, and jokes about his son’s good looks. These anecdotes help establish the composer’s disposition, making Prokofiev seem more human and genial, giving some insight into the origins of his music. As the book progresses, Prokofiev’s life outside film is referenced less and less in favour of notes on his work ethic, glossing over important moments such as his separation from his wife, Lina. Elsewhere, Morrison writes of Prokofiev’s first meeting of his mistress, Mira Mendelson, when vacationing with his family. Morrison tells of how Mendelson and Prokofiev’s budding relationship strained the Prokofiev’s marriage, and how Prokofiev left his wife for Mendelson just months

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before the onset of war between Russia and Germany. Bartig could have mentioned the upheaval in Prokofiev’s personal life and how his becoming separated from his sons and leaving them in Moscow near the war’s front while moving across the country worried Prokofiev. This reality might also provide a further reason for Prokofiev’s increased musical output during the war: to settle himself and keep from worrying.

Kevin Bartig’s *Composing for the Red Screen: Prokofiev and Soviet Film* is a comprehensive historical look at Sergei Prokofiev’s film compositions. Bartig provides numerous musical examples and explains them with straightforward prose. The way Prokofiev’s musical ideas are presented by Bartig makes them easy to follow; both enthusiasts of Russian music and educated scholars can enhance their knowledge through use of this text. Overall, Bartig’s offering is an intensive, engaging, and in-depth study. The breadth of Bartig’s research, with the exception of Prokofiev’s wartime work, surpasses any other scholarship on the subject. Bartig adds much to a budding subject, and the work is a welcome addition to discussions of Prokofiev and Russian film music.

For further reading:


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10 Morrison, *The People’s Artist*, 157-161.