



Sergei PROKOFIEV

Symphony no. 2 in d minor, Op. 40

Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev (27 April 1891 – 5 March 1953) was a Soviet composer, pianist and conductor. As the creator of acknowledged masterpieces across numerous musical genres, he is regarded as one of the major composers of the 20th century. His works include such widely heard works as the March from *The Love for Three Oranges*, the suite *Lieutenant Kijé*, the ballet *Romeo and Juliet* – from which "Dance of the Knights" is taken – and *Peter and the Wolf*. Of the established forms and genres in which he worked, he created – excluding juvenilia – seven completed operas, seven symphonies, eight ballets, five piano concertos, two violin concertos, a cello concerto, a Symphony-Concerto for cello and orchestra, and nine completed piano sonatas. A graduate of the St Petersburg Conservatory, Prokofiev initially made his name as an iconoclastic composer-pianist, achieving notoriety with a series of ferociously dissonant and virtuosic works for his instrument, including his first two piano concertos. In 1915 Prokofiev made a decisive break from the standard composer-pianist category with his orchestral *Scythian Suite*, compiled from music originally composed for a ballet commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev of the Ballets Russes. Diaghilev commissioned three further ballets from Prokofiev – *Chout*, *Le pas d'acier* and *The Prodigal Son* – which at the time of their original production all caused a sensation among both critics and colleagues. Prokofiev's greatest interest, however, was opera, and he composed several works in that genre, including *The Gambler* and *The Fiery Angel*. Prokofiev's one operatic success during his lifetime was *The Love for Three Oranges*, composed for the Chicago Opera and subsequently performed over the following decade in Europe and Russia.

After the Revolution, Prokofiev left Russia with the official blessing of the Soviet minister Anatoly Lunacharsky, and resided in the United States, then Germany, then Paris, making his living as a composer, pianist and conductor. During that time he married a Spanish singer, Carolina Codina, with whom he had two sons. In the early 1930s, the Great Depression diminished opportunities for Prokofiev's ballets and operas to be staged in America and western Europe. Prokofiev, who regarded himself as composer foremost, resented the time taken by touring as a pianist, and increasingly turned to Soviet Russia for commissions of new music; in 1936 he finally returned to his homeland with his family. He enjoyed some success there – notably with *Lieutenant Kijé*, *Peter and the Wolf*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and perhaps above all with *Alexander Nevsky*. The Nazi invasion of the USSR spurred him to compose his most ambitious work, an operatic version of Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. In 1948 Prokofiev was attacked for producing "anti-democratic formalism." Nevertheless, he enjoyed personal and artistic support from a new generation of Russian performers, notably Sviatoslav Richter and Mstislav Rostropovich: he wrote his ninth piano sonata for the former and his Symphony-Concerto for the latter.

Symphony No. 2 in D minor, Op. 40 was written in Paris in 1924-5, during what Prokofiev called "nine months of frenzied toil". He characterized this symphony as a work of "iron and steel". Prokofiev modeled the symphony's structure on Beethoven's last piano sonata (Op. 111): a tempestuous minor-key first movement followed by a set of variations. The first movement, in traditional sonata form, is rhythmically unrelenting, harmonically dissonant, and texturally thick. The second movement, twice as long as the first, comprises a set of variations on a plaintive, diatonic theme played on the oboe, which provides strong contrast to the defiant coda of the first movement. The subsequent variations contrast moments of beautiful meditation with cheeky playfulness, yet the tension of the first movement is never far away and contributes an ongoing sense of unease. The last variation integrates the theme with the violence of the first movement, reaching an inevitable climax. The symphony ends with a touching restatement of the initial oboe theme, eventually dispelled by an eerie chord on the strings.