



Sergei PROKOFIEV

Symphony No. 3, Op. 44

Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev (23 April 1891 – 5 March 1953) was a Russian and 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. Prokofiev's greatest interest 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. In 1936 he finally returned to his homeland with his family.

The music derives from Prokofiev's opera *The Fiery Angel*, a touching love story set against the backdrop of demonic possession. This opera had been accepted for performance in the 1927-28 season at the Berlin State Opera by Bruno Walter, but this production never materialised; in fact, the opera was never staged in Prokofiev's lifetime. Prokofiev, who had been working on the opera for years, was reluctant to let the music languish unperformed, and after hearing a concert performance of its second act given by Serge Koussevitzky in June 1928, he adapted parts of the opera to make his third symphony (shortly afterwards, he drew on his ballet *The Prodigal Son* for his Symphony No. 4 in similar fashion). The symphony, which was dedicated to Nikolai Myaskovsky was premiered on 17 May, 1929 by Pierre Monteux conducting the Orchestre Symphonique de Paris. Though the music of the symphony is based on that of the opera, the material is developed symphonically; the symphony is therefore absolute rather than programmatic.

The first movement, in traditional sonata form, opens with clashing chords played by the whole orchestra, along with tolling bells, setting a mood of threat and unrest. An impassioned first theme enters on strings, while a melancholy second theme on bassoons and lower strings provides contrast. The climactic development section follows, finding space for a third theme, which eventually combines with the first two themes. After a grave climax with gigantic orchestral chords and a last "struggle" in marching rhythms, the ethereal recapitulation ensues, in which the first and second themes are integrated, although much reduced and played softer, as if only the shadow of what was before remains.

The second movement, a meditative andante with a tripartite structure, displays Prokofiev's talent in creating fragile, gossamer textures. The central section is more brooding in nature, with the theme consisting of semitones.

In the third movement, we hear hybrid elements from both of the movements that preceded it: though the textures are lighter than in the first movement, the sense of foreboding is back, as dithering strings create a chilling effect. They are intensified by insistent announcements from the brass choir and bass drum.

Finally, in the fourth movement, Prokofiev reprises musical materials from earlier in the symphony, beginning at a comfortable andante pace and gradually accelerating. The themes of the opening movement are threaded into the narrative before the Third comes to rest on a fearsome juggernaut of violent chords.