



# Sergei PROKOFIEV

## *Symphony No. 6*

**Sergei 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.

Prokofiev's *Symphony No. 6*, written as an elegy of the tragedies of World War II, has often been regarded as the darker twin to the victorious *Symphony No. 5* in B-flat major. Prokofiev said of the symphony, "Now we are rejoicing in our great victory, but each of us has wounds that cannot be healed. One has lost those dear to him, another has lost his health. These must not be forgotten." The symphony was condemned in 1948 by the Soviet government under the second Zhdanov decree for not conforming to party lines, but it was favourably received among critics. The symphony is in three movements, rather than the conventional four, and lasts 40–45 minutes. The first movement is characterized by an overall sombre mood, which Prokofiev described as "the painful results of war". It contains three themes: The first, on 1st violins and violas, is like the winds of a graveyard; the second, played by oboes, is slower and more melancholic; the third theme is played by the cor anglais accompanied by a lugubrious marching rhythm. The ensuing development section builds up tension using elements from the first theme before reaching an excruciating climax, the aftermath of which is the ghostly pulsating echoes on horns. The recapitulation only consists of the second and third themes, while the coda contains a final struggle until a C-flat major (enharmonically B major) climax, eventually to recede into silent despair, ending in E-flat major with a minor plagal cadence. The second movement, a slow threnody in arch form, opens with clangorous sonorities, before revealing a main theme full of noble character. After the thunderous climax in the central section, reflective horns call out a nostalgic melody, later to be accompanied by the music-box sounds of the celesta and harp. The noble melody returns and the movement ends with the same clangorous sonorities as it had begun with. The finale, although having switched to the key of E-flat major (a supposedly "happy" key), is actually ambiguous in character: the lively main theme, initially carried by the violins, is answered by pounding timpani and brass, as if to threaten it back. A subsidiary theme follows on woodwinds and is accompanied by a chugging rhythm on strings. The two themes are subsequently developed and eventually combined. However, a mournful bassoon then winds down the previous activity and there is a thought-provoking reappearance of the melancholic oboe theme from the first movement, as if to remind us again of the pains of war. After the meditation, there is a resumption of the threatening poundings of timpani and brass, this time accentuated with "wrong notes", and the symphony ends with a sardonic cry from high brass, juxtaposing F major with D major before the ultimate E-flat major chord.