



# Sergei PROKOFIEV

## *Symphony No. 5*

**Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev** (23 April 1891 – 5 March 1953) was a Russian composer, pianist and conductor. Prokofiev became involved in music at an early age under the influence of his mother, and had already completed 3 operas by the time he entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory at 13. He had an obvious boredom with traditional harmony, complaining that his first teacher taught him "square" phrase structure and conventional modulations, which he subsequently had to unlearn. Prokofiev would go on to graduate from the conservatory in 1914 with 2 piano concertos in his catalogue, and would leave for the United States in 1918 due to numerous premiere cancellations caused by Russia's war involvement. His stay in the United States was short lived, however, as his opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*, was cancelled when the Chicago Opera Association's music director passed away before its performance. Running out of money, Prokofiev moved to Paris in 1920, not wanting to return to Russia as a failure. He found more hardships in Europe, as he admitted that he "was evidently no longer a sensation" after a mild reception of his *Symphony No. 2* (1925). In Moscow, Prokofiev initially fell under the scorn of the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM), who prevented him from premiering his ballet, *Le pas d'acier* (1926) – at the Bolshoi Theatre. When the RAPM was dissolved in 1932, Prokofiev gained the respect of the USSR, and was commissioned to write music for several government-endorsed films, Joseph Stalin's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party, and even won the Stalin Prize twice for his "War Sonatas". Prokofiev would reach the peak of his celebrity as a leading composer of the Soviet Union in 1945, following the premiere of his *Symphony No. 5*, but had much of his music banned in 1948 through the "Zhdanov Decree". Prokofiev would pass away under this censorship, as he died on the same day as Stalin, marking the end of the decree.

*Symphony No. 5, Op. 100* was written in one month in 1944 at a composer's colony outside Moscow. He conducted its premiere on 13 January 1945, and as he took the stage, artillery fired outside. Upon leaving the Great Hall, the audience learned the gunfire marked the Red Army's crossing of the Vistula into Germany.

The first movement (*Andante*) is presented in sonata form. The exposition begins with a gentle theme, played through the flutes and bassoons. With the second theme led by flutes and oboes, the pace ramps up as tremolo strings anxiously build. The violins and brass introduce a more heroic theme, which is followed by a skittering figure in the strings. After an intense – yet lyrical – development, the opening themes are re-introduced in the trumpets, and the movement concludes with a foreboding, grand coda.

The second movement (*Allegro marcato*) is a scherzo filled with sardonic humor. The elaborate game of cat and mouse played by the orchestra takes a brief respite, with the woodwinds leading a more melodic theme. Despite the softer theme's multiple attempts to settle the dance of the scherzo, each instance is followed by an increasingly frantic section, ensuring the unnegotiable vigour of the movement.

The third movement (*Adagio*) begins with swift sixteenth triplets in the strings, acting as a buffer between the quickness of the previous movement and the upcoming meditation. The first theme is long, spanning numerous octaves in the woodwinds, and is fully realized when carried into the highest register of the violins. The range of this movement expands further, when the low strings introduce a new, urgent theme. The music builds into a violent, deathly outburst, before an eerily delicate version of the opening melody is re-introduced before the movement ebbs and flows one last time.

The last movement (*Allegro giocoso*) begins with another transitional section, bridging over the preceding music via a recall to the opening theme of the symphony. The movement proper, a rondo, begins with a melodic theme in the solo clarinet with a lively string backing. This melody alternates with contrasting sections, and many ideas from the previous movements reappear. The symphony climaxes in a wild and brilliant finale, with the tonal themes being thwarted by percussive, brutal figures. In sheer irony and unpredictability, Prokofiev ends the piece on a B flat unison, which seems to allude to the dishonesty of the impending end of WWII, proclaiming: "The war might be over, but the damage has already been done".