



**Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev** (23 April 1891 – 5 March 1953) was a Russian composer, pianist and conductor who mastered numerous musical genres and is regarded as one of the major composers of the 20th century. Prokofiev was born in Sontsovka (now Krasne in Donetsk Oblast, Ukraine), an isolated rural estate in Yekaterinoslav Governorate, Russian Empire. He displayed unusual musical abilities by age five. His first piano composition to be written down (by his mother), an 'Indian Gallop', was in the Lydian mode (a major scale with a raised 4th scale degree) as the young Prokofiev felt 'reluctance to tackle the black notes'. By seven he had also learned to play chess. Much like music, chess would remain a passion, and he became acquainted with world chess champions José Raúl Capablanca and Mikhail Botvinnik. At age nine he was composing his first opera, *The Giant*, as well as an overture and miscellaneous pieces. Prokofiev studied at the Petersburg conservatory from 1904 to 1914. By 1915 he was already one of the outstanding figures of modern Russian music. In

his early works, Prokofiev employed new modes of expression while audibly referring to the musical language of the late nineteenth century. Prokofiev followed various stylistic courses. He was known as a radical exponent of provocative new music and also distinguished himself through his neoclassical experiments. Later he would be known precisely for his synthesis of the unusual and the familiar, of complexity and simplicity, of constructive rationality and melodious emotionalism. In 1918, hoping for greater artistic perspectives, Prokofiev left Russia for the United States. After mixed experiences there, he left in 1922 to settle in Paris. Prokofiev was not a "classical" emigrant: He assumed Soviet citizenship in 1924 and often travelled to the Soviet Union to give concerts. Finally, in 1936, the artist returned to Russia with his family. His decision can be attributed to a deep longing for his home country, a diffuse sympathy for the political developments there, a marked interest in the privileged position of an exceptional artist in the Soviet state, and a sense of invulnerability. It was not difficult for Prokofiev to fulfil the ideological standards of "Socialist Realism," given the melodious simplicity of his work. He had long ago given up his futuristic inclinations and instead tried to realize a new rhythmic-motoric, tonally tense, poignant style. Yet in 1948 even Prokofiev was severely criticized by the Soviet government, which perceived "formalistic distortions and anti-democratic tendencies" in the works of leading Soviet composers. Prokofiev criticized himself, and until his death (on the same day as Stalin's) he attempted to reconcile his own stylistic conceptions with the party line. In 1917 Prokofiev took a summer holiday in the countryside to work on several scores. Two of those works marked a major change in his compositional style. His early scores were noted for their modernist, *avant-garde* tendencies and difficult instrumental writing. With the composition of his First Violin Concerto and Classical Symphony Prokofiev revealed a new simplicity of form and structure, a rich orchestral palette, and a new melodic sensibility. While the composer was undergoing this (temporary) stylistic metamorphosis the forces of revolution were sweeping through Russia.

The **Symphony No.1** is one of the early examples of musical neo-classicism. Prokofiev builds his score around the classical symphonic structure established by Haydn. The orchestration consists of strings, timpani, and pairs of winds – similar to the scoring of a Haydn or Mozart symphony. The driving rhythmic urgency of the outer movements, the piquant harmonies, and the angular melodic lines speak in 20<sup>th</sup> century terms. Prokofiev conducted the highly successful premiere in April, 1918 in Petrograd. Serge Koussevitzky (a lifelong champion of Prokofiev's music) conducted the American premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. The sprightly opening theme of the first *Allegro* is succeeded by a sly, wryly sardonic second theme in the strings. Dissonant harmonies work their way through the development before matters are classically resolved in the recapitulation. A soaring string melody dominates the *Larghetto*. Instead of a *Minuet* Prokofiev turns to the French rococo for a *Gavotte* in the third movement - a witty melodic confection with a trio of stately angularity. The *Molto vivace* finale moves at a brisk clip with tangy commentary by the timpani. The entire score reveals remarkable clarity and transparency of orchestral timbres and vivacious rhythmic and melodic zest.