

PROKOFIEV'S SEVENTH SYMPHONY AND ITS TWO ENDINGS: A STUDY OF "IMPOSED" REVISIONS

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ABSTRACT

Why does a composer resort to changing any one of his compositions? Under what circumstances does the creative output need to be re-evaluated and perhaps reconsidered? Prokofiev's final Seventh Symphony presents two endings different in mood and character, one subtler and the other more vivid. This paper examines the background behind the appearance of the alternative ending – most specifically an extended coda, which appeared as an indication of a conformist stance on Prokofiev's part, an attempt to appease the regime and probably obtain the Stalin Prize, so essential to him.

KEYWORDS: Sergei Prokofiev, Seventh Symphony, Finale, revisions, "obsuzhdenie," Stalin Prize

Sergei Prokofiev's Seventh Symphony in C sharp minor, opus 131, was composed between 1951 and 1952. "A fair evaluation of Prokofiev's last symphony requires an appreciation of its total context – both the musical context of the work as conceived by the composer, and the external, non-musical context in which the composer's creative intentions developed" (Brown 1979: 455). Indeed, to understand the presentation of the variant finale, even though the rest of the symphony remains untouched, it is essential to shed light onto Prokofiev's persona and its subsequent correlation to the external circumstances that affected his compositions. "In his First Symphony, young and robust Prokofiev had undertaken to verify the validity of his mind's ear by posing for himself a problem in creativity. Almost thirty-five years later, aging and infirm, he undertook to verify in his Seventh Symphony the validity of creative criteria imposed on him by his demanding patron, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union" (Ibid, 454–455).

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After the Revolution, and approximately half a year after the establishment of the Soviet Government, Prokofiev felt that he needed a “break,” to embark on new adventures, to gain a “breath of fresh air” (Shlifstein 2000: 50). Thus, with the approval of Anatoly Lunacharsky he left his country, at a crucial time, when history was being written again, to experience musical life in the United States first and later in Paris. However, he was reconciled to the new regime of the USSR in the mid-1930s, and thus he returned to his country in 1936, where he spent the last seventeen years of his life under the critical eye of Stalin’s cultural policies, managing, despite the adversities, the ups and downs, the tumultuous “relationship” with the Stalin Prize Committee and Soviet officials, to win the more Stalin Prizes than any other Soviet composer, trying to, and managing in many cases, to “smuggle his art across aesthetic borders” (Frolova-Walker 2008: 453).

On a personal level, Prokofiev was a “self-assured man, tending toward acerbity and even arrogance” (Minturn 1997: 8). On the one hand, he was rigorously methodical; when his manuscripts reached the publisher they were completely free of mistakes. On the other hand, this passion for order, efficiency and honesty meant that on occasions he turned frequently to his earlier compositions, revising them and giving them new opus numbers, even in the form of arrangements and transcriptions. “There is humour, parody and caricature in his work, not of a very subtle kind, but bold and deliberately exaggerated in effect” (Lockspeiser 1955: 25). For Prokofiev, any musical idea could evolve into a different texture with a new meaning and become part of another work. He had always been outspoken about what he considered injustices to his music, and his pride and customary confidence could be hurt at times, leading him to strike out against simple-minded critics. However, even though he defended his music, and was confident about it, he could still be critical towards it. If he did not feel satisfied with a composition, he would go back and rework it. This is why he returned throughout his life periodically to old works, “ruthlessly ripping them apart, revising and polishing them with the determined and irrepressible discontent of a true artist” (Brown 1979: 287). Revised works include the *Sinfonietta*, op. 5, which was composed in 1909, revised in 1914 and later reworked as op. 48 in 1929. In addition, the symphonic sketch *Ossene* was composed in 1910 and was revised twice, in 1915 and again in 1934, as well as *The Gambler*, op. 24, composed in 1915 and radically revised in 1927. The revision of the opera *War and Peace* occupied the composer for many years, mainly from 1943–1952. The opera is especially noteworthy, since it was the composition that turned the tables on his “fortune” with the Stalin Prizes and the relevant Committee, even though it also proved how much officials could interfere with the evolution of an opera, directing the composer towards the correct path for its completion. The composer’s Fifth Piano Sonata, op. 38, composed during his years away from the Soviet Union, was radically revised in 1952–1953, as op. 135. The Fourth Symphony, composed in 1929–1930, was radically revised and expanded in 1947, indicating the composer’s avowed intention to “rehabilitate a defective but worthy score by adjusting it to the standards and practices consolidated in the Fifth and Sixth [Symphonies]” (Ibid, 4). Furthermore, at the time of his death in 1953, he had planned major reworking of two of his works, the Second Symphony and the Sonatina in E minor. Even on his deathbed in 1953, he was waiting for news of the audition of his Seventh Symphony at the Union of Composers, which took place in his absence, since he was too ill to attend. As Kabalevsky claims in his

reminiscences, he "wanted to be reassured that his creative quests had been understood and appreciated." Furthermore, Kabalevsky goes on to claim that after the triumphant performance of the Symphony under the baton of Samuel Samosud, Prokofiev was a bit unsettled and worried about the change he made in the finale, and thus he decided to change it back to the original ending (Shlifstein 2000: 219).

Thus, for Prokofiev, going back to earlier works for amendments and revisions was not a random phenomenon but instead, in part, a customary process and a trait indicative of his character and composing technique (if we do not take into consideration the suggestions for changes in his music imposed by the Stalin Prize Committee). Nevertheless, the case of the alternative ending present in the Finale of the Seventh Symphony was not planned by the composer in order to improve the work, and neither was the composer dissatisfied with the ending, but it was instead a matter of random external circumstances and interferences coming together. Prokofiev's "openness to criticism [received from the Soviet regime] and respect for authority was somewhat at odds with his self-confidence," and it is indicative of the reasons behind this rather obligatory revision (Minturn 1997: 8). Indeed, Prokofiev's behaviour is justified by taking into consideration the patronage of the Soviet state, which was not to be taken lightly. The administration of musical life was effectively controlled by the central government. From the time when Prokofiev decided to return to Russia "proclaiming his Soviet citizenship, Prokofiev's creative utterance underwent change. He returned to participate in the collective will of Soviet music" (Brown 1979: 460), an adjustment which he undertook with remarkable promptness. "The participation involved neither uncritical acceptance of that will nor the sacrifice of his own creative individuality. It did involve, however, a gradual and subtle conditioning of his personal creative attitudes by a set of ideological principles objectively formulated according to the current Soviet political-economic theory" (Ibid, 460–461). The concept of the new culture was to be puritanical and retrogressive. The vagueness of "Socialist Realism" humiliated the artist by imposing the notion of self-censorship. In order for the artist "to avoid controversy, it was best to maintain a steady flow of music based on the nineteenth-century harmonic scheme. Safest to adhere to an unadventurous, old-fashioned idiom... Inevitably a mood of forced optimism tended to prevail" (Gutman 1988: 119). Soviet artists should interpret the life of the whole community. Stalin's right-hand man Andrey Zhdanov called for "vivid realistic music that reflects the life and struggle of the Soviet people" (Ottaway 1955: 75). The government's intervention in Prokofiev's creative process was quite striking (Frolova-Walker 2016: 72). However, Prokofiev had managed, as mentioned earlier, to win more Stalin prizes than any other composer, and more importantly, he shook off his initial status of an immigrant composer who was influenced by the ways of the West. During the few years before the decree of 1948, Prokofiev's compositions would easily gain the approval of the Stalin Prize Committee. What is even more admirable though, is the fact the Prokofiev retained his compositional originality, avoiding compromise as much as possible. "If a similar piece had been written by Shostakovich, it would have been taken apart, competing narratives would have been imposed and, after much argument, it would most likely have been rejected for pessimism, or at best, scraped in for a second prize. By contrast, the Prokofiev of the mid-1940s needs no discussion:

he is a Soviet classic, who can be nodded through by the KSP without the need for careful listening” (Frolova-Walker 2016: 79–80).

The Central Committee’s Resolution of 10 February 1948 was the main authority which decided what works would be performed, censoring music that did not comply with its “standards,” and Prokofiev’s hands seemed tied by the devastating attacks of the Party on his person as well as on other prominent composers (i.e. Shostakovich, Khachaturian). Of course Prokofiev along with the rest of the composers who were attacked could not be nominated for a Stalin Prize. Consequently, Prokofiev did not “dare begin a new symphony without measuring its conception against the principles defined in the Resolution” (Brown 1979: 455), but instead, with the works that followed the decree of 1948, he tried to be more careful with the regime and regain its favour, building a positive climate towards him, as a composer. But it could be argued that he may well have believed in the fundamental validity of the criticism directed at Soviet music, and he might have rationalised the injustice by subscribing to the basic principles outlined by the resolution. A way for him to answer back was with a uniquely moving and personal tale originally intended for children, in the shape of the Seventh Symphony, a symphony which documents Prokofiev’s compliance with the party’s resolution and exemplifies the modifications in style characteristic of his last five years. Ingeniously, he decided that a Symphony specifically for children would not only satisfy the censorship of the party, but it would also become the means for expressing “an aesthetically justifiable reason for further simplifying his musical idiom... These works never pretended to sophistication in musical idiom. They are typified by directness, simplicity, clarity and withal an originality unencumbered by self-consciousness. [These were] precisely the elements required of Soviet music by the Central Committee” (Ibid, 455–456). The work was released for the “obsuzhdenie”² and approved by it; it was also hailed by Pravda, a sign that Prokofiev had managed to exorcise once again the devil of formalism.

Indeed, the final movement of the symphony begins *vivace*, and continues with a playful character, which is reinforced by the role of the percussion instruments, and especially the triangle, tambourine and snare drum, which suggest a children’s party. This, however, comes to a halt rather abruptly at the beginning of the recapitulation at 108 and is never to return – at least in the original ending. The playful mood of the movement is replaced by a rather sceptical and emotional stream of music. The aspiring theme from the first movement makes its appearance in the tonic at 108, repeated later on by the trumpet (five bars after 109) and then modulates to the relative major of the minor tonic E (Examples 1a and 1b).

Then the bell-theme from the first movement restores the minor tonic and then dissolves into an ostinato accompaniment for a series of short cadential phrases at 111. The music becomes slower and slower, gradually fading away. By recalling the lyrical second theme and the tranquil closing idea from the first movement, the reversal of mood is successfully achieved (Examples 2a and 2b).

2 The “obsuzhdenie” were obligatory discussion sessions at the Composers’ Union, where new works were submitted for constructive criticism and suggested revisions by the membership.

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Example 1a. Prokofiev: Symphony No. 7 original theme as it appears in the first movement

Example 1b. Prokofiev: Symphony No. 7 the same theme at cue 108 of the final movement

Example 2a. Prokofiev: Symphony No. 7 the bell theme as it appears in the first movement

Example 2b. Prokofiev: Symphony No. 7 the bell theme rearranged, three bars before 111

At the occasion of the first performance the quiet ending was condemned, and “at the request of Samuel Samosud, the conductor of the première of the symphony, Prokofiev provided an alternative close for the finale” (Brown 1979: 464). Vladimir Vlasov, a composer friend of Prokofiev, referred to this change in his reminiscences, saying that “Prokofiev responded to comradely suggestions tactfully and attentively, at times even with unnecessary haste and willingness. Thus, the second variant of the closing measures in the finale of the Seventh Symphony came about only because Samuel Samosud, who conducted the symphony, asked Sergei Sergeevich if it would not be better to end the symphony *vivace*, using again the principal theme of the finale” (Ibid). The conductor’s wish was based on the hope that the new ending would be the catalyst for winning Prokofiev the first class of the Stalin Prize, since Samosud strongly believed that the original peaceful ending would lead to a second-class Prize, which was half the money of the first-class prize. Prokofiev did not mind doing something which would earn him an additional 50000 roubles, since he would still be able to keep the original ending in the published score. As mentioned by Morrison in his book, the composer, who was living in dire conditions and with faltering health, needed the money, and the award of the First Stalin Prize would be beneficial to his ailing finances (Morrison 2009: 373). Samosud’s advice to Prokofiev, however, and as suggested by Frolova-Walker, was a personal opinion, not representative of the opinion held by the prize committee, since he was no longer a member (Frolova-Walker 2016: 86). If he were a member he would be aware that members of the committee such as Vladimir Zakharov considered the fast 2/4 as a *galop*, danced by Soviet youth, as a means of mockery. Zakharov firmly believed that this light-hearted portrayal of carefree youth was not representative of the real Soviet youth (Ibid, 84). Malcolm Brown quotes Prokofiev remarking about the new ending: “All right, have it your way. But I still think my first version is better.” Kabalevsky is also quoted by Brown, remembering, as mentioned earlier, that Prokofiev “regretted the change he made in the finale, and wanted to return to the original version for its [the symphony’s] publication” (Brown 1979: 464). Prokofiev is known to have told Mstislav Rostropovich, “But Slava, you will live much longer than I, and you must take care that this new ending never exists after me” (Jaffé 1998: 211). The score now contains both endings; however, the original, subtle ending is the one mostly used at performances.

To be exact, the alternative close provided by Prokofiev is more of an extended coda added at the end. This short coda does not give the impression that it was given much thought by the composer, incorporating as it does material and themes from the beginning of the finale (Example 3).

It is an artificial ending, with no organic connection to the rest of the finale, and with no identity or structural value. Without this additional codetta and by maintaining two contrasting moods throughout the finale, the composer wanted to bring to the surface his own battle against the demands of the regime. It seems that these two moods represent the inner struggle he had to fight against his own creative self. On the one hand, the playful and carefree mood does not only symbolize the “ideals” and the positivism the communist regime wanted to pass to the people through the arts,

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Example 3. Prokofiev: Symphony No. 7

but is indicative of Prokofiev's compromise; on the other hand, the rather sceptical and dreamier mood which governs the recapitulation unveils the composer's deeper feelings and wishes. Even though this contrasting mood appears only towards the end of the movement, it is enough to bring to the surface the real, uncompromising Prokofiev. The painful addition that "kills" the purpose of the finale is so artificial and fake that it can only be interpreted as another attempt of mockery, irony and cynicism, or even a note of orthodox optimism, or simply a final effort to obtain the award money.

Hugh Ottaway claims that the Seventh Symphony is as much an act as the earlier *Classical Symphony*, for, "rather than wit, coolness and musical carpentry, it calls for seriousness, richness of colour and emotional growth, the very qualities least conspicuous throughout the composer's development... there is far too much reliance upon well-worn phrases and progressions... with little attempt to endow them with added meaning" (Ottaway 1955: 75). "The lesson, on the other hand of this last symphony of Prokofieff – a work as acceptable in New York and London as in Moscow – is that a fusion can be achieved, in music at any rate, if not yet in other spheres, between the demands of individualism and those of the society the artist serves" (Lockspeiser 1955: 25).

While to Hugh Ottaway, the symphony seems like an act, for Malcolm Brown the finale, particularly, sounds like "Prokofiev burlesquing someone impersonating Prokofiev" (Brown 1979: 464). It could be argued that the "vulgar" finale, with its simple rhythms and toccata-like movement, cannot be considered as a serious attempt at symphonic writing, but instead as a cynical and ironic gesture by the composer to humour the Party principles through a parade of traditional features of current Soviet music. Olin Downes's interpretation of the finale's character suggested that "Prokofieff, with his well-known independence of character and capacity for satire, was subtly and invisibly, as it were, showing up his critics by giving them with barbed malice precisely the type of bourgeois music that they wanted, and of which they would ignorantly approve; a protest concealed within the four walls of a symphony, and the authorities none the wiser" (Downes 1953: 7).

How little the "variant" finale mattered to Prokofiev is shown, in a way, by the fact that he did not go to any more trouble to proceed to any significant changes in

order to accommodate the new finale musically, since it was mainly composed to serve a specific intent and purpose. It appears that Prokofiev did not mind acquiescing to the suggestion of Samosud, who included the symphony in the repertoire, of providing the alternative joyful ending in order to be eligible for the first-class Stalin Prize. Probably for him, a few extra bars of animated and patriotic-sounding music were not enough to destroy the effect of the original ending. It is true that even with his previous three symphonies (Fourth, Fifth and Sixth) he had to resort to “carnivalesque festivities” in order to appease the Socialist regime and the notion of social realism, and it was thus a pattern not unknown to him (Frolova-Walker 2008: 483). The variant finale was too superficial to overshadow the quiet and more sombre colouring of the former ending. Genuine connoisseurs of Prokofiev’s music would not be misled by the alternative ending, and would rather be understanding of the pressure put on the composer by the Soviet regulations. Since the original ending is still incorporated in the music, appreciation of it should not falter. Its serenity and peaceful mood can still be appreciated. Moreover, because of the difference of character between the two endings the impression left by the first ending is somewhat more striking.

Indeed, the Seventh Symphony proved to be Prokofiev’s final symphonic statement, since the following year marked the composer’s death. Despite the turmoil surrounding Prokofiev’s compositional output, his conformation or non-conformation – passive resistance to Zhdanov’s demands, the Seventh Symphony, and the reality of the circumstances that surrounded it and have become known to us, especially with the conditions surrounding the two available endings, for more idealistic and possibly somewhat naïve music lovers it might seem discomfiting fully to appreciate this final symphony – even though it would seem difficult not to appreciate a symphony intended for children, that is, however, in the not-so childlike key of C sharp minor! However, behind all the assumptions and misconceptions, those truly familiar with Prokofiev’s opus realize that there lie undercurrents that signify nostalgia and reminiscence, connecting his individual past, the tunes and experiences from his own childhood, his present and his future. This symphony with the original ending says farewell to the audience, serving as Prokofiev’s valediction at the end of his life. This subtle ending is not at all obscured by the “joke” alternative ending, but rather it becomes even more cynical, surviving and going on, as was Prokofiev during his final years in the Soviet Union.

Overall, the Symphony’s conventionality and deliberately naïve character, as characterized by Lockspeiser, “is generally disciplined into polite musical behaviour but which nevertheless does occasionally assume the form of one of Prokofiev’s ironic grimaces – this conventionality can only be interpreted as a surrender to the social demands which we know are from time to time re-imposed on Soviet composers” (Lockspeiser 1955: 24).

On the other hand, as a last thought to consider, there is an argument eloquently put by Hugh Ottaway regarding the way westerners view this symphony, in the light of its “studied simplicity... and the lack of a strong fundamental structure”. Despite these, Prokofiev’s Seventh Symphony, among many other works by composers that were considered as ‘Zhdanov’s failures,’ managed to grip audiences, going beyond the

luxury and the privilege that the western artist possesses, attainable and approachable by only a tiny minority (Ottaway 1955: 75).

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ГЕОРГИЈА ПЕТРУДИ

СЕДМА СИМФОНИЈА ПРОКОФЈЕВА И ЊЕНА ДВА ЗАВРШЕТКА: СТУДИЈА О „НАМЕТНУТИМ” РЕВИЗИЈАМА

(САЖЕТАК)

Рођен и одгојен у царској Русији, Сергеј Прокофјев се до 1918. наметнуо као *enfant terrible* музичког света. Након Револуције напустио је своју земљу и живео у Сједињеним Америчким Државама и Француској. Међутим, након „помирења” са новим совјетским режимом средином тридесетих година XX века, он се вратио у домовину 1936. године и тамо провео последњих седамнаест година живота, под будним оком стаљинистичких структура. Контрола над уметничком продукцијом коју су спроводиле совјетске власти навела га је да више пута мења завршетак своје Седме симфоније, као и других дела. Опера *Рај и мир*, како се испоставило, представљала је најуспешнији

покушај Прокофјева да успостави равнотежу између своје инспирације и политичких очекивања, што је касније резултовало његовим освајањем највише Стаљинове награде. Његова жеља да види своју оперу на сцени била је толико снажна и неутажива да је композитор био спреман да унесе буквално све тражене измене, скраћења и резове, не би ли осигурао њено извођење. Што се тиче алтернативног завршетка финалног става Седме симфоније, он није био плод Прокофјевљеве намере да побољша своје дело, нити је сам композитор био незадовољан њеним оригиналним завршетком; ревизија је извршена на основу мишљења диригента Самуила Самосуда, који је (како ће се показати, неосновано) веровао да ће се изменом завршетка повећати шанса да симфонија освоји највећу (новчану) награду и да ће тиме помоћи композитору, који је у том тренутку веома тешко живео. У овом тексту разматрам различите врсте ревизија које су спроведене у Седмој симфонији, као и фундаменталне разлоге који су довели до тога да буду ревидиране.

Кључне речи: Сергеј Прокофјев, Седма симфонија, Финале, ревизије, разматрање, Стаљинова награда