

Prokofiev's 4th Symphony and me (posing as Sherlock) – the strange case of the dog that didn't bark, then barked too loud.

I've had a nodding acquaintance with the music of Prokofiev since I was a teenager. You could say that throughout my adult life I've known his 'greatest hits': *Peter and the Wolf*, the *Classical Symphony*, *Lieutenant Kije*, *Romeo and Juliet*, the 3rd and 5th Piano Concertos, the Suite from *The Love for Three Oranges*. The First Violin Concerto was my introduction to musical modernism aged twelve or so, and I've gone back to it constantly ever since (in Oistrakh's recording). Later in my teens I found the 7th Piano Sonata and was wowed by its angular sourness and its spectacular jazzy finale. That was the extent of it, really. Being an adolescent of the late 1950s and early 60s I quickly moved on to 'more important stuff'. The pinnacle of modernism seemed to me to be *The Rite*. In 1962 I listened on the radio to the premiere from Coventry of the *War Requiem*. In 1963 I composed my first serial piece. In 1966 I encountered *Pierrot Lunaire*. Then there was John Coltrane. Then there were the Beatles. Prokofiev – from the cultural climate of the time and from what I knew of him – seemed a minor figure, the composer of children's classics and sparkling, brilliant, sometimes gorgeous, occasionally deep works. I left him at that for the rest of my adult life.

Then quite recently, updating my LP of the 5th Piano Concerto to a CD, I received by default Richter's recording of the 8th Piano Sonata. This bowled me over, and I determined to complete the set of the 'War Sonatas' by listening to No. 6 also. I spent my 66th year getting to know these works and realising that the 7th Sonata I'd known all this time was really just an intermezzo between two masterpieces. I got hold of a biography and read about late, Soviet-period works such as the 6th Symphony. I'd heard snatches of the Symphonies down the years and dismissed them: in my mood at the time they had seemed tame compared with ones by Berio or Lutoslawski, or works by composers who didn't even *write* symphonies anymore. But I got a CD of the 6th and was terrified and amazed. I got obsessed. I ended up with recordings of this work by Jarvi, Rozhdestvensky, Previn, Kitajenko, Leinsdorf, Mravinsky and Rostropovich. Clearly Prokofiev was something special. I moved on to the 5th – equally though differently impressive (Alsop added to the list of conductors). So I spent my 67th year filling in the gaps in my Prokofiev knowledge: the First Violin Sonata, the Cello Symphony-Concerto and Sonata (which Alison and I played, me on the double bass), the rest of the Piano Concertos, *Scythian Suite*, *Le Pas d'Acier*, *War and Peace*: and the remaining Symphonies. Which brings us to the 4th.

Prokofiev's 4th Symphony draws many of its themes from his ballet *L'enfant prodigue*, produced in Paris in 1929 by the Ballets Russes, the last work ever commissioned by Diaghilev before he died and his company folded. The ballet was a great success and Prokofiev obviously had much affection for it because he drew from it a concert suite as well as the 4th Symphony. The Symphony was premiered in 1930,

but garnered poor reviews, and in 1947 Prokofiev revised it drastically, enlarging its orchestral forces and increasing its running time by 50%. In my 2012-13 trawl of the Symphonies I listened to both versions and, on a short acquaintance, found neither satisfying. What had gone wrong?

Prokofiev's great champion in America, Serge Koussevitsky, commissioned the 4th Symphony as part of the celebrations for the 50th anniversary of the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1930. What could be more celebratory, Prokofiev must have thought, than a cool and classical dance symphony based on tunes from his proven success *L'enfant prodigue*? But there was competition and he would have to produce a stunner. He wasn't the only composer commissioned for the celebration, and the list was heavyweight: Ravel (the G major Piano Concerto), Hindemith (*Concert Music for Strings and Brass*), Gershwin (*2nd Rhapsody*), and then symphonies – in addition to Prokofiev's – by Albert Roussel, Howard Hanson and, not least, Stravinsky (*Symphony of Psalms*, no less). Now of all these composers Stravinsky was the obvious Heavyweight Champion – he had more or less invented modern music and then a decade later repeated the trick with Neo-Classicism. He was king of the world – at least in Paris. And for this occasion, as it turned out, he provided one of the great masterpieces of his career, a tower of 20th Century music. To counterbalance this, something special was needed: Ravel got it right with the Piano Concerto, a frothy, jazzy, tuneful showpiece, a sort of *A Parisian in America*. Prokofiev stumbled. The Ravel outshone him, the Stravinsky crushed him.

Prokofiev, though, kept faith with his Symphony. 'It was not a success,' he wrote, 'but I love it for its absence of noise [*who was he having a dig at here?*] and the wealth of fine material which it contains.' What does he mean by 'not a success'? – in its reception by the audience? – by the critics? Cool applause and bad reviews do not a dud piece make. Perhaps the 4th Symphony was a tender wallflower awaiting its moment of true appreciation. Prokofiev obviously didn't think so, because despite his love of it he revised it. As a composer you don't take reviews at face value, the good or the bad, you draw your own conclusions. Prokofiev recognised the 4th Symphony as flawed. In 1947, now a Soviet citizen, he had just enjoyed two consecutive triumphs with the 5th and 6th Symphonies, he was on the crest of a wave (his disgrace at the hands of the authorities would not happen until the following spring, and was sudden) and he must have thought, here's a piece worth rescuing. With hindsight a composer can often see what needs fixing in an old piece, and flatters himself that with the more developed technique he has learned in the meanwhile he can do a proper job this time. So Prokofiev plunged in. In the event he never heard the result: his disgrace the following year precluded any performance and he died in 1953 before his music had been fully rehabilitated. Had he heard it, I wonder what he would have thought.

In my confusion at the state of the two versions, 1930 and 1947 (at this point in the summer of 2013 I'd only listened to either a couple of times) I decided to go back to first principles. I ordered a CD of *L'enfant prodigue* and listened to that. Perhaps the

fount of his inspiration would give me a clue. I was surprised: *L'enfant* is a sort of hybrid between a numbers ballet and a story ballet (as is *Petroushka*, as would be *Romeo and Juliet*) but in musical terms it is little more than a succession of good tunes and dramatic set pieces. I immediately saw that I must downgrade my expectations of the Symphony: an earlier composer such as Mozart might even have named this music not 'symphony' but 'serenade'. My next surprise was how little of the Symphony I heard in the ballet: Prokofiev took no more than half-a-dozen of the good tunes and left dozens more – equally fine – untouched. Four of the ballet's twelve numbers contain no trace of the Symphony at all, others only a few bars. Conversely, the stately sarabande that opens the Symphony, returning at the climax of the second movement, doesn't appear anywhere in the ballet. Nor does the second subject of the first movement – a movement which, apart from its vaulting main theme, was, as far as I can tell, completely new-composed for the 1930 version of the Symphony.

Armed with this new knowledge I listened to the Symphony again (the 1930 version, which I judged would be closer to the ballet) then *L'enfant* again, then the Symphony again, in the course of 24 hours. I began to form a theory. Prokofiev had crafted three short, episodic movements from the tunes he borrowed, containing a minimum of development but lots of lyricism and drama. These three are the first, second and fourth movements of the Symphony. For the third, a sort of Brahmsian Intermezzo rather than a scherzo, he had lifted a single number from Scene One of the ballet which he presented more or less unaltered, with the addition at the end of some variant forms from its reappearance in Scene Two.

Thus he made his Symphony. Why didn't it quite gel? To my mind the first three movements are formally well-balanced and contain fine inspiration: they work admirably. It's with the fourth that Prokofiev trips up. Had he written a strong finale I'm certain he'd have had a success – from every point of view – on his hands. But the finale is a mess. I could see what he was after: a busy, scurrying kaleidoscope of ever-changing images à *la Shrovetide Fair*. But he failed. The movement doesn't deliver. Things he should have provided, I thought, were a strong, memorable opening, some highly characterised episodes and a ringing peroration at the end. (Not a lot to ask, I hear you cry.) Strange that he didn't notice that all these things are missing. The finale scuttles along unmemorably and then abruptly stops with the most cursory of endings. No wonder the Symphony flopped. A weak inside movement can perhaps be passed off, but not a finale.

So this is why he revised the Symphony, I thought to myself. He knew he'd messed up the last movement. If I'm right, I thought, then when I listen again to the 1947 version (my head was so full of 1930 I'd forgotten it) I'll find all these things put right. Eagerly I put on the CD. But before we arrived at the last movement I had to sit through the first three. I have mentioned that Prokofiev increased the running time by 50%: the first movement goes from a sleek 7 minutes to a bloated 14. Doubled. OK, I said, give it a fair go. And I must say, there are wonders in there, riches. Prokofiev was

no fool. The music leaps out. *But*, but, but: a cool, classic Serenade movement is turned into a galumphing piece of bombast. For all its brilliance and occasional subtlety, he's ruined it.¹ He's tried to turn it into another 5th Symphony but the material doesn't stand it. (It only just stands it in the 5th Symphony.) Well, on to the slow movement. This fares better, but gets the Big Treatment once again. The glory of the 1930 version is the restraint with which the opening melody is brought back at the end: here Prokofiev overblows it even at the beginning.

On to the 'Intermezzo'. Here was a more pleasant surprise. Prokofiev throws a spray of astringent all over it. In the ballet it was a sweet interlude, transposed (as we have said) to the Symphony almost unchanged. Now in 1947 it's gone from Tchaikovsky to Shostakovich, cynical, dry, sneering almost. I loved it. But I loved the original too. Hard choice.

And finally the finale, here it is. What will Prokofiev do? – yes! – he does exactly what I prescribed, with a strong, memorable opening, lots of highly characterised episodes (many the same as before, but he's made them stand out, full of character) and a rousing coda calculated to bring on the applause. That's better, *now* we have a Symphony. Except...

So here's my revised theory. Prokofiev saw what was needed for the finale and decided to revise it: 'but while I'm at it...' he started tinkering with the other movements, ending up with something so different and with so much new material that, as he himself said, it 'could really be called my Seventh Symphony'. And, sadly, much of this revision does not constitute an improvement. However I do think there's a good Symphony in there: in future when I listen I'll play the first two movements of the 1930 version; for the Intermezzo I'll choose between the 1930 and the 1947 versions: in certain moods I'll enjoy either; and for the finale I'll go with 1947. That will provide a satisfactory piece. It's true that there is much fine new material in the first two movements of the revision: so I will, occasionally, turn to them: but I doubt if I'll ever listen to the 1930 finale again.

¹ Two changes he made were in my opinion more than just matters of balance, they were serious errors of judgment. The first is the new 'motto theme' that opens Opus 112. It's crass, in Prokofiev's least memorable Soviet manner. In no way does it equal the wonderful, atmospheric opening of Opus 47, and it ruins that passage when it does appear. The return off the motto later in the first movement feels like a bolt-on, not an organic development. However its final statement as the peroration of the whole Symphony does work, perhaps because we hear the quintuplet trumpets, not the melody, as the dominant motif.

The second gaffe is Prokofiev's decision to alter the main first subject of the *Allegro eroico* in the opening movement. How he must have worried at the reasons for Opus 47's failure: was it this, was it that? At some moment he'll have thought, 'Oh, that simplistic tune, people expect something more sophisticated.' So he changed the bare, arresting repeated B-G-C of Opus 47 to the more complex riff of Opus 112. A mistake – the Beethovenian 'moment of recognition' is lost. This is a mistake Stravinsky wouldn't have made – he could never resist a bathetic gesture when he knew it would work: and it was one Prokofiev shouldn't have made after the miracle of 'The Montagues and the Capulets' – utter simplicity, utterly sublime.