

And if you want to know more...

Prokofiev - Symphony No. 7 in C# minor

It seems that the composer Serge Prokofiev was an awkward genius who showed incredible perception on the one hand but had a personality that was naive, almost self-destructing on the other. From an early age, with the support of his musically capable mother, he displayed a precociousness which resulted in him composing his first opera at the age of nine, in 1900. As professional success and adulation came his way he was given permission in 1917 to move to the US by the seemingly enlightened commissar for education: "You are a revolutionary in music, we are revolutionaries in life. We ought to work together. But if you want to go to America I shall not stand in your way."

However, the strains of touring as a concert pianist when he regarded himself primarily as a composer, plus the downturn in large scale music and opera productions in this country for economic reasons, caused Prokofiev to rethink his strategy. Ultimately in 1933 he returned to his homeland and died there on the same day as Stalin in 1953. During this twenty years he produced some of his most significant music; *Lieutenant Kije*, *Romeo and Juliet* and the *Symphony No. 5* amongst others. Initially he enjoyed enormous status and adulation at home but the quirks of Stalin's support and 'patronage' resulted in him falling from grace and dying in virtual poverty.

I've wanted to bring you his Symphony No. 7 for a long time now. For me it's been totally captivating since the moment I first heard it. That said, why it should have such a strong hold continues to elude me. It has the most beautiful, luscious and at times innocent melodies. Nostalgia might also be a strong emotion that the composer is trying to evoke but also, if we allow it to take us there, the glowing radiance of an almost transcendental journey awaits.

The symphony is cast in the usual four movements and, as a sign of Prokofiev's poverty, was written between 1951 and 1952 with an eye to winning the 100,000 ruble Stalin Prize. The conductor of the premiere, Samuil Samosud, implored the composer to 'cheer up' the ending saying that adding a jaunty little coda could mean the difference between first and second prize. Reluctantly he agreed but with the words: "Slava, you will live much longer than I, and you must take care that this new ending never exists after me."

After a first movement that sets the overall mood of either tranquility or nostalgia-tinted joy, the second movement is a beautiful waltz betraying Prokofiev's love for ballet and even hinting at his score for Cinderella some eight years earlier. The dream-like qualities of the third movement are followed by the boisterous and vivacious finale which ultimately gives way to the glowing vista of the very opening of the symphony. Yearning, despair and the sadness of life's realities close this stunningly beautiful symphony. Prokofiev never did win that first prize.

Gershwin - Rhapsody in Blue

It's almost perverse to programme such richly coloured and immediately uplifting music as Gershwin's after enjoying so much contemplation from his Russian contemporary. But the clue perhaps is in that last word, contemporary. We rarely think it, but that's indeed what they were and both Prokofiev and Gershwin were trying to ply their trade at the same time in America in the 1920s and '30s. For me it shows the incredible breadth and array of expressions and sentiments possible with music and orchestral music in particular. Both composers were individualistic and complete masters of their chosen genres. But that, and also their shared Russian/Ukrainian heritage, is where it all ends.

On February 12th, 1924 a concert entitled "An Experiment in Modern Music" took place at the Aeolian Hall in New York. Emerging from that concert was one of the most iconic fusions of the jazz and classical styles, George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Commissioned by the bandleader Paul Whiteman, the rhapsody was first performed with Ferde Grofé's band-orchestration with Gershwin as soloist. Grofé would go on to make several more orchestrations including the symphonic scoring of 1942 - five years after Gershwin's death.

Initially Gershwin rebuffed Whiteman's enthusiastic attempts to commission an extended work from him. Whiteman had been hugely impressed by their collaboration on *The Scandals* (a series of Broadway revues) in 1922 and was desperate to continue the partnership. Gershwin however had other ideas, feeling that Whiteman's self-imposed deadline left him too little time to do the job properly. Only when a newspaper article announced the premiere - Whiteman feeling that a rival was about to steal his thunder - did Gershwin agree to the 'rush' commission.

Critical reviews were mixed but popular acclaim, both then and since, has sent the *Rhapsody in Blue* onto a pedestal of its own. And that opening clarinet glissando - a musical figure as recognisable as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony? Well, that was arrived at quite by chance: the clarinetist in Whiteman's band, Ross Gorman, stretched the opening notes out as long as he could, largely as a joke for the unsuspecting Gershwin, and 'jazzed' the passage up as much as possible. The composer loved it and asked him to keep it that way and add as much of a 'wail' as possible!

Gershwin - An American in Paris

"My purpose here is to portray the impressions of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises, and absorbs the French atmosphere." And how very well he did it too, even to the point of including Parisian taxi horns!

Composed in 1928 the music falls, roughly, into five linked sections. Initially we hear two 'walking' themes before Gershwin goes all 'bluesy' on us in the middle section. Ultimately those 'walking' themes return but not before the most grandiose tour of the French capital both by day and by night, as the semi-distant intoning of a swing band lures us in!

The story goes that Gershwin was so smitten by the music of Maurice Ravel that in 1926 he set off for France with the intention of studying with the great man. Though warmly welcomed personally, Gershwin is said to have been rejected as a student with the words, "Why be a second-rate Ravel when you can be a first-rate Gershwin?"

Though Gershwin was to die tragically young just a few years later aged 38 he left an indelible impression on the musical world with his unique fusion of emerging jazz styles and their harmonic and melodic freedoms within the structural rigours of the classical world.

-Andrew Constantine, Music Director