



Classics Concert Insights Lecture

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PROKOFIEV SYMPHONY #1 "CLASSICAL" (1917)



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“CLASSICAL” 1917

SERGEI PROKOFIEV BIOGRAPHY (1891-1953):

- Born in Ukraine. An only child.
- A prodigy, initially taught by his mother, he began composing at age five.
- Admitted to St. Petersburg Conservatory, 1904, age thirteen.
- *An enfant terrible, “he gave Rimsky-Korsakov and Liadov a hard time.”* (Steinberg)
- Piano Concerto #1 (1912), #2 (1913), while still a student. #1 earned him the Rubinstein Prize in 1914.
- Graduated from Conservatory, 1914. Began career as pianist, conductor and composer.
- Age 26 in 1917, a troubled year in Russia, was the most richly productive year of his life. Violin Concerto #1, 3rd & 4th Piano Sonatas, “Classical” Symphony, and other works.
- Emigrated to the U.S. 1918, lived in New York City, continuing his career.
- Moved to Paris, 1923.
- Returned to Russia, 1936, and lived the remainder of his life there.
- Initially celebrated as the pre-eminent composer of Russia, he nonetheless became a target of Stalinist repression, 1948.
- Died in 1953, on the same day as Stalin.

HISTORY OF THE SYMPHONY:

- Begun in 1916, with World War I raging, completed in September 1917, in the midst of the Russian Revolution.
- Most of it was written in the summer of 1917, while on a countryside sojourn.
- Having decided to emulate the Classical style of Haydn, Prokofiev found it easier to compose without a piano.
- *“It seems to me that if Haydn had lived to our day, he would have retained his own style while absorbing something new at the same time. This was the kind of symphony I wanted to write.”* (Prokofiev).
- First performed in Petrograd in April 1918.
- *“The composer’s aim was to resurrect the ‘good old days’ of strong traditions, the days of hoop skirts, powdered wigs, and queues.”* From the program of the first performance.

“CLASSICAL” FEATURES OF THE FIRST SYMPHONY:

- Brief. Running time approximately 15 minutes.
- Adheres to the genre in overall structure: four movements, lined up as expected, each featuring expected musical forms.
- Clear lines. Cadences well-articulated, subsections easily identifiable.
- Expression restrained. “*Buoyant and comedic in spirit, and without weltschmerz and angst.*” (Steinberg) In the aftermath of the late Romantic era, this was particularly difficult for a composer to accomplish.

FIRST MOVEMENT: Allegro; D major; Sonata Form

EXPOSITION:

- Begins with a two measure *Mannheim Rocket*, a rising D major triad in full orchestra.
- Theme I, cheerful and energetic is in four parts, each beginning with a burst of loud tutti chord. These bursts will remain a hallmark in the movement.
- Theme I phrasing: a – a’ – b – b’, each separated by an orchestral burst, that will become a characteristic of this movement.
- Theme I is not a typical four-square, antecedent-consequent melody common in the Classical Era. Nor is it entirely in the home key of D major.
- “a” is a series of rising-falling scales in rapid tempo played by strings, first version in D major, the home key, second version, a’, in C major.
- “*Not even Haydn with all his harmonic daring would have repeated the theme in distant C major within ten seconds.*” (Steinberg)
- This surprise appearance of C major will foreshadow a greater surprise in Recap.
- “b” is another melody with rising-falling scales, but now with a skipping-hopping rhythm, presented by the flute and echoed by other winds. First version in D major, second in B minor (another “non-Classical” key change).
- Brief transitional passage derived first from motive of “b”, then “a”, creates a sense of anticipation, leading to Theme II.
- Theme II (A major, the “correct” key) is in three parts, each an antecedent-consequent phrase, again separated by orchestral bursts. Phrasing: a – b – a’ – c – a’ – d.
- Theme II “a” is stately and dance-like, with a dotted-rhythm and melodic leaps, played by strings, with a staccato baso-continuo in bassoon that gives the tune a comic quality.
- “b” is a brief transition, ending with F major triads (another unexpected key), functioning like a semi-colon.
- “c” is the longest of the countermelodies, variations on a motive of “a”, extending the melody.
- “d” is brief and transitional, also derived from the main theme.

- The closing section is brief and loud, derived from Theme I and features numerous, frequent orchestral bursts. It ends convincingly on a closed cadence and fermata, clearly stating that the exposition is over.
- NOTE: The frequent orchestral bursts contribute to the “clarity of line” by demarcating various sections within the movement. They also serve as ornamentation, and a common thread, a “glue”, that holds the composition together.

THERE IS NO EXPOSITION REPEAT:

- This is contrary to the Classical tradition.

DEVELOPMENT:

- Phrases “a” and “b” of Theme I developed, orchestral bursts separating them.
- Theme II developed loud, polyphonic, in different instrument groups, including ff horns. The dainty theme reveals a more “heroic” character in this section.
- With Theme II Prokofiev “*unleashes a more-than-classical forcefulness in the development.*” (Nice)
- Music derived from the Closing Section ends the development, emphatically repeating the same concluding chord before transition into Recapitulation. This maintains “clarity of line”, convincingly stating the end of Development.
- NOTE: Every aspect of the Exposition contributes to Development, a feature more typical of the Romantic Era.

RECAPITULATION:

- Begins with the same *Mannheim Rocket* as in the beginning of the movement.
- Theme I, phrase “a”, the string melody, reappears in C major, followed – after a burst – by phrase “b”, the flute melody, in D major.
- The recap thus begins in the “wrong” key of C major, abruptly correcting to the “correct” key in its second phrase, giving us a separation of the melodic recap from the harmonic recap. This is certainly **not** Classical.
- Overall Theme I is shortened in Recap to just those two phrases. This is then followed by a bridge passage in which Theme I material is developed.
- Theme II reappears in D major, also shortened to two phrases, the second somewhat extended.
- Closing theme repeated twice.
- NOTE: The end of development and beginning of Recap is one big joke. The five concluding chords at the end of development set up the joke, invoking anticipation into recap. The separation of the melodic recap from harmonic is the joke. “*Prokofiev is pulling our leg – big time.*” (Peter Jaffe)

CODA:

- Four orchestral bursts of concluding chords lead to another, final, *Mannheim Rocket*, ending the movement.

NOTES:

- For a compact movement that lasts only around 4 minutes, it is complex, and packs plenty of nuance.
- It features numerous elements that would have been foreign to Classical Era ears including a Theme I in an unexpected key, lack of Exposition Repeat, expressive development (especially Theme II), and a novel recapitulation featuring an unexpected key.
- “*One of the charms of the Classical Symphony lies in Prokofiev’s skill at conveying something of the essence of Haydn while not writing a single measure that could possibly occur in a Haydn Symphony.*” (Steinberg)

SECOND MOVEMENT: Larghetto; A major; A – B – A Form

INTRODUCTION:

- A stately, slow, triple meter dance, minuet-like in strings.

A:

- Strings, play at their highest register; a slow, pretty tune, with steady beating pizzicato accompaniment.
- A variation of the tune in lower strings, but now with high winds joining in and maintaining the aura of a high register.

B:

- A quiet tune, entirely on pizzicato strings, derived from the main theme. It’s as though the accompaniment of “A” took over.
- Texture of the pizzicato tune thickens as other instruments, especially winds join in.
- A dramatic rapid ascent and crescendo, reminiscent of Movement 1 *Mannheim rocket*.
- A new, legato melody emerges, derived from the introduction; the pizzicato returns to the accompaniment.
- The melody fades away.

A:

- Main theme returns, still in high register strings but in a new key.
- This is followed by a passage harkening back to “B”, featuring both the pizzicato main tune, and the legato late tune.
- Main theme variation, similar to that which ended the first “A”

CODA:

- Introduction dance returns and is extended as a diminuendo retard, ending in quiet, almost solemn concluding chords.

THIRD MOVEMENT: Gavotta: Non Troppo Allegro; D major; Ternary Form A- B- A;

Prokofiev chooses a Gavotte, instead of Minuet, the Classical Era norm, for this movement. Gavotte is a duple meter dance (2/2 or 4/4 time) of French folk origin, also popular in the court of Louis XIV, like the minuet.

A: Gavotte

- A moderately loud tune, stately and with moderate tempo.
- Note the octave leaps in the melody.
- Phrase structure: a – b – a' – b – a'.

B: Trio

- A quiet tune with a drone accompaniment, invokes an old Baroque bagpipe-like instrument: the musette.
- The section consists of this tune and a more ornamented variation.

A: Decapo

- As if influenced by the soft music that preceded it, the Gavotte now returns quietly, at first in winds.
- It is abbreviated, with a phrase structure: a – b – a'.
- The music fades out.

FOURTH MOVEMENT: Molto Vivace; D Major; Sonata Form; 2/2 time

EXPOSITION:

- Theme I is an energetic, rollicking melody, its phrases, a – a' – a'', delineated with orchestral bursts as in the First Movement theme.
- First two phrases in D major, but a'' is in A-flat & G Major.
- The music gives the impression of a fast ride in a galloping horse.
- Rollicking, fast bridge gallops along, derived from Theme I motive.
- Transitional theme, derived from Theme I, with the same rhythm in two variations, second louder. Ends in a brief, dizzying drop that introduces Theme II.
- Theme II, in A Major (the dominant of D Major & Classically expected key), is a very brief, quieter but still fast tune in flute, echoed by strings. It passes by in a whirl.
- Closing music a set of loud, concluding chords, ends in a closed cadence and brief fermata, clearly outlining the end of exposition.
- NOTE: The cheerful energy of this music is Haydnesque.

EXPOSITION REPEAT:

- Unlike the first movement, the exposition is repeated verbatim, thus obeying the Classical Era rule.

DEVELOPMENT:

- Very brief.
- Begins with a chord repeated four times as a fading echo, as if galloping by it fast.
- The Development is mostly about Theme II. In first half Theme II motive is developed in various wind instruments in an imitative fashion. Music remains fast, forward momentum unhesitating.
- In the second half Theme II is contrasted with the Transitional Theme and Theme I.
- Music imperceptibly slides into Recapitulation, the first two phrases of Theme I appearing without the orchestral burst, as though it was another appearance of a motive within the Development.

RECAPITULATION:

- As above, Theme I returns in disguise, as if part of Development.
- Orchestral burst! We now realize we are in Recap. One more phrase of Theme I left (a''), then bridge music.
- Transitional theme returns, ending with a rise instead of the “dizzying drop” in Exposition.

- Theme II is three times as long as its Exposition counterpart, begins with flute and echoed in strings. But then it is echoed in various other instruments in an imitative fashion, as in the beginning of the Development.
- Closing music returns verbatim and ends the movement.
- NOTE: the extension of Theme II at the end of Recap can be considered a Coda-like gesture. The movement otherwise does not have a distinct Coda.

NOTES:

- In tempo and spirit this movement embodies everything that Haydn stood for.
- It deviates from the Classical norm in its unconventional renditions of Themes I & II in the Recap.

CONCLUSIONS:

Prokofiev's First Symphony adheres to the overall plan of a Classical Era work, is brief, and sounds Classical on the surface. However, its details and construction reflect a post-Romantic aesthetic, dramatically divergent from the Classical Tradition. In this regard, the symphony is a product of its own time.

“If the radio announcer told you he was going to play something by Haydn and started a recording of the Classical Symphony, it would take you only a few seconds to figure out that you were being put on. ...Prokofiev was not trying to produce a forgery....Nor did he intend a parody...This is a high spirited and sparkling salute.” (Steinberg)

Compared to Beethoven, Prokofiev's deviations from the classical norm are more widespread; he did, because he could, catering to ears receptive to such deviations, while Beethoven's audience was not.

“While remaining within the tradition of the classical symphony, which he understood and revered, Prokofiev twisted and distorted it without destroying it.” (Minturn) The exact same can be said of Beethoven's First Symphony.