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Prokofiev [Prokof'yev; Prokofieff], Sergey [Serge] (Sergeyevich)

(*b* Sontsovka, Bakhmut district, Yekaterinoslav gubeniya [now Krasnoye, Selidovsky district, Donetsk region, Ukraine], 15/27 April 1891; *d* Moscow, 5 March 1953). Russian composer.

1. Pre-Soviet period.
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1. Pre-Soviet period.

Prokofiev's operatic career began at the age of eight (with *Velikan*, 'The Giant', a 12-page opera in three acts), and he always saw himself first and foremost as a composer of music for the lyric stage. If this seems surprising, it is not only because of Prokofiev's great success in the realm of instrumental concert music but also because of the singularly unlucky fate of his operas. Of the seven he completed, he saw only four produced; of the four, only two survived their initial production; and of the two, only one really entered the repertory. As usual in such cases, the victim has been blamed: 'Through all his writings about opera there runs a streak of loose thinking and naivety', wrote one critic, 'and it runs through the works, too'. That – plus a revolution, a world war and a repressive totalitarian regime whose unfathomable vagaries the composer could never second-guess – indeed made for a frustrating career. Yet time has begun to vindicate some of those long-suffering works, and we may be glad that despite everything (and unlike Shostakovich) Prokofiev persisted as an operatic composer practically to the end.

The charge of 'naivety' derives from Prokofiev's life-long commitment to what might be called the traditions of Russian operatic radicalism. The ideal to which he always remained true, however much circumstances may have eventually mandated departure, was that of the through-composed dialogue opera, following the precedent set in Russia by Dargomïzhsky's *The Stone Guest* and Musorgsky's *Marriage*. Like the later *Pelléas* and *Salome*, these works of the 1860s were already 'sung plays' (to borrow Joseph Kerman's useful term) – that is, verbatim settings of pre-existing stage dramas, in which the whole idea of *dramma per musica* was scrapped in the interests of 'truth', and problems of operatic 'form' and libretto structure finessed. *The Stone Guest* was a setting of one of the four so-called 'little tragedies' in verse that Pushkin had written in 1830. Another of them was *Pir vo vremya chumï* ('A Feast in Time of Plague'), of which Prokofiev made two fragmentary settings as an adolescent, the second of them (1908) a furious declamatory scena on the concluding priestly harangue,

which he played the next year at his final examination (in 'form') at the St Petersburg Conservatory and succeeded as planned in exasperating his professors, Anatoly Lyadov and Alexander Glazunov.

By the time of his graduation he had heard *Marriage*, which received its incredibly belated première in 1909 at one of the legendary St Petersburg 'Evenings of Contemporary Music'. An even bolder break with established operatic tradition than the residually lyrical *Stone Guest*, Musorgsky's 'experiment in dramatic music in prose' (to quote its subtitle), on the text of the opening scenes from a terse misogynistic comedy by Gogol, fully deserved the sobriquet 'recitative opera'. Virtually all shaping in it is accomplished by the text and a few rather skimpily deployed leitmotifs, but the musical interest is at all times centred on the voice parts, never the accompaniment.

In 1915 Prokofiev went abroad for the first time and heard Dyagilev and Stravinsky disparage opera as an outmoded form, destined to be superseded by the ballet. The effect of their then-fashionable strictures, curiously, was to imbue the young composer with a mission to revitalize the doomed genre. Returning to St Petersburg, he wangled a commission from Albert Coates, then conducting at the Mariinsky, and went to work on *Igrok* ('The Gambler', on his own prose libretto after Dostoyevsky's novella), in which Musorgsky's principles of one-act anti-opera would be applied at full evening's length. Press interviews Prokofiev gave in 1916, shortly after completing the opera, fairly paraphrase the militant letters Musorgsky had written around the time of *Marriage* and the first version of *Boris Godunov* – letters that had come out in book form that very year. Like Musorgsky, he called for the abolition of set pieces in favour of freely flowing dialogue, dismissing verse texts as 'an utterly absurd convention', and denying that the dramaturgy of opera need differ in any way from that of the spoken drama. But there was an important difference: where Musorgsky's motivation had been a lofty neo-Aristotelian conviction that mimesis of speech was the key to mimesis of emotion, Prokofiev's concerns were more narrowly those of stagecraft (he called it 'scenic flow').

Thus in practice Prokofiev's 'dialogue opera' technique turned out not to be quite so uncompromising as Musorgsky's had been, enabling him, as his friend Nikolay Myaskovsky put it, to solve 'the problem set by *Marriage*' and other works of its kind 'in a way that gives music its due'. More sensitive than either Dargomïzhsky or Musorgsky to considerations of musical form, abstractly conceived (possibly because, unlike them, he was after all a conservatory graduate), Prokofiev was far more disposed than they to give his vocal compositions an easily comprehended general shape. He made considerable use of generalizing accompaniments both to unify long spans and thereafter to return in significant or recapitulatory ways. Often, too, recurrent melodies (whether outright leitmotifs or not) have a way of accompanying his voice parts at formally strategic moments even if they are not actually sung.

Prokofiev's most characteristic and original operatic technique is one that might be termed the 'melodic mould' – a simple melodic idea (i.e. pitch sequence) into which just about any line of prose can be poured by observing Musorgskian rules of good declamation. (These rules, easily inferable from *Marriage*, primarily involve the regular spacing of the tonic accents according to the metrical scheme, and the arrangement of the unaccented syllables around them in freely varying *gruppetti*.) The most compact instance of the technique in Prokofiev's early operas is the small part of the Inn-keeper in the first scene of *Ognennïy angel* ('The Fiery Angel', completed 1923, after Bryusov). Her two appearances are framed by lines set to

the same melodic mould, which serves not only as an identifying leitmotif but also as a form definer, since it ties her appearances into neat little *ABA* packages (ex. 1).

Ex.1 Melodic mould technique in *The Fiery Angel*, Act 1 scene i

'Melodic mould'

INNKEEPER

Zdes', go-spo-dín rī - tsar', È - to luch - sha - ya kom - na - ta.
['Here, Sir Knight, this is the best room']

Mó-zhet bīt', go-spo-dín rī - tsar' zhe - lá - yet vi - ná í - li ba - rá - ni - nī?
['Perhaps Sir Knight would like some wine or some lamb?']

Akh, go-spo-dín rī - tsar', lúch - she ne sprá - shi - vai - te pro - ne - yó!
['Ah, Sir Knight, better not ask about her']

Pro - schái - te go-spo-dín rī - tsar', i da u-be-re-zhót vas ot ne-yó né - bo!
['Farewell, Sir Knight, and may Heaven protect thee from her!']

Whatever the concessions to 'purely musical' considerations, however, Prokofiev made sure that not one of his pre-Soviet operas sported so much as a single closed vocal number. The only 'detachable' music in them, so to speak, is orchestral, for example the March and Scherzo from *Lyubov' k tryom apel'sinam* ('The Love for Three Oranges', 1919, after Gozzi by way of Vsevolod Meyerhold). In the case of *The Gambler* and *The Fiery Angel*, detaching the music for concert use required considerable recasting (in the case of *The Gambler* into the suite, *Four Portraits*; in the case of *The Fiery Angel* into the Third Symphony). The composer sought, and in large measure achieved, a truly continuous scenic action, supported by music that asserted perhaps a more conspicuous shaping role than in the works that provided him with his most immediate models, and yet where – in keeping with just about every Russian composer's anti-Wagnerian credo – at least as much melodic interest was concentrated in the voice part as in the orchestra. Though leitmotifs were admitted into Prokofiev's operatic technique, their use is restrained and rather primitive compared with the Wagnerian prototype, lest they subvert the nature of the sung play by turning it into a 'symphonic poem' (to cite the other member of Kerman's dichotomy).

Difficulties with casting and direction prevented *The Gambler* from reaching the stage on schedule; the revolution the next year finished its foreseeable chances. Meyerhold's announced production in 1929 was frustrated by militant opposition from the Russian Association of Proletarian Musicians (RAPM), an omen Prokofiev (naively) chose not to heed. The work was finally produced in Brussels that year in a French translation; but an operatic style so founded on declamational procedures suffers translation badly. (That Prokofiev continued to write declamational operas on Russian prose texts during his years of emigration indicates that he always had a Russian audience in mind.) *The Love for Three Oranges* could make its way despite the linguistic handicap because of its profusion of visual gags (and its higher proportion of illustrative orchestral music); it was the single Prokofiev opera that could be called a success within his lifetime. *The Fiery Angel*, though, found no favour with Western European or American impresarios (though a Berlin production under

Bruno Walter was briefly contemplated). By the time Prokofiev returned to his Soviet homeland (a gradual process complete by 1936), the opera was in a double bind, for Soviet arts policy by then precluded its performance. The utter waste of this score, on which Prokofiev had laboured on and off for eight years and which he regarded as his *chef d'oeuvre*, was the greatest fiasco of his career.

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2. The 1930s.

And yet, ironically enough, his inability to get *The Fiery Angel* produced seems in large part to have motivated his return. Frustrated in his bid for leadership in the world of Parisian modernism, where he saw he would always play second fiddle to Stravinsky (and feeling that 'there is no room for me' in America 'while Rakhmaninov is alive'), he beat a tactical retreat to a more provincial pond where he would be beyond dispute the biggest fish. The dissolution of the RAPM in 1932 seemed to remove the last obstacle; it was in that year that Prokofiev accepted Soviet citizenship, though he maintained his Paris apartment until 1936. He finally agreed to give it up when he allowed himself at last to become convinced that he would be exempt from overt political pressure.

That, if anything, was naive. And yet at first Prokofiev managed, even as he appeared to be accommodating himself to a new discipline, to justify writing the kind of opera he believed in. An essay of 1940 describing his first Soviet opera, *Semyon Kotko* (after a novella by Valentin Katayev), is very much to the point. Despite the oft-quoted lip service paid there to 'a new people, new feelings, a new life [requiring] new means of expression', it is evident that the new means – new, that is, to Soviet audiences – were in fact Prokofiev's accustomed manner. Recognizing that Soviet arts policy was becoming increasingly orientated towards the safest elements in the Russian 'classical heritage', Prokofiev (not usually credited with political adroitness) adopted a sly tactic: he paraphrased a well-known letter to Mme von Meck in which Tchaikovsky, whose centenary was being triumphantly celebrated in 1940, acknowledged his operatic failures and admitted that (in Prokofiev's words now) 'when a person goes to an opera he wants not only to *hear* but to *see*'. Prokofiev cited two kinds of aria, both of which can be found in *Yevgeny Onegin*: the 'Lensky type', which paralyses action, and the type exemplified by Tatyana's Letter Scene, which carries the action along. Prokofiev tacitly expanded the latter category to encompass the whole range of his prosy, through-composed operatic practices, remarking that 'occasionally I have had to substitute vocal parts which, though not arias in the exact sense, offer no less opportunity to the singer'.

Yet there are important differences between *Semyon Kotko* and Prokofiev's earlier operas, suggesting that he did look to the classical Russian tradition for guidance. At this point, however, he did so not directly in response to Soviet pressure (the brunt of which he was yet to feel), but because he was determined not to repeat the staggering failure of *The Fiery Angel*. Most fundamental was a return to basic traditions of contrast-driven dramaturgy he had formerly eschewed as outmoded (e.g. between diatonic good and chromatic evil, between national idioms, between heroic rhetoric and genre detail). Never before in his operatic career had Prokofiev paid the slightest attention to elements of genre or to national character, and his prior dramaturgical convictions had rejected contrast in favour of what he had called in the

case of *The Gambler* a 'steady dramatic crescendo'. In *Semyon Kotko* he allowed himself actually to quote one folksong, to imbue tunes of his own devising with characteristically folklike melodic turns and to introduce a limited number of vocal set pieces. Even the prose recitatives were given memorable thematic structure by the use of repeated words and phrases that carry musical repetitions in tow. (Note, for example, all the repetitions of the line 'Nu i s tem dosvidan'ichka', 'Well, with that let's say goodbye', as a transitory leitmotif in Act 2 scene ii, the scene with which Prokofiev began composing the work in March 1939; the leitmotif is then linked motivically with other melodies associated with the positive characters.)

Between the completion of *Semyon Kotko* and its first performance, the Soviet Union signed its non-aggression pact with Germany, making an opera dealing with German interventionism at the time of the post-revolutionary Civil War something of an embarrassment (in the production the Germans became Austrians). Critical opinion was mobilized to retire the opera from the stage on the pretext that its tone did not do justice to the theme of heroism. In fact Prokofiev had given that theme special emphasis of a characteristically Soviet kind. When one of the wedding choruses accompanying the title character's betrothal in Act 2 recurs in the finale, sung to a new text rejoicing in the dawn of Soviet power, the opera palpably crosses the boundary into specifically Soviet aesthetic terrain, as it also does when (using the 'melodic mould' technique) Prokofiev tailors a chorus accompanying the burial of a revolutionary martyr to fit a theme that had previously served as one of Semyon's leitmotifs. To use Semyon's theme as the basis of a general expression of faith in the revolution is to tie the individual to the collective in a way that has obvious connections with the tenets of Socialist Realism (even as the 'realists' of the 19th century had opposed such devices for excessively generalizing the portrayal of character). But it was to no avail: once again a Prokofiev opera fell victim to singularly inopportune timing.

Yet *Semyon Kotko* set the tone for Prokofiev's Soviet operas just as decisively as *The Gambler* had done for the earlier ones. From now on, and definitely under official pressure, Prokofiev would continue in the new direction his work had taken. This meant, first, strengthening the lyric element, both by permitting closed and detachable vocal numbers and by 'musicalizing' his prose declamation (along lines, it should be emphasized, already implicit in his earlier work); secondly, incorporating, at times interpolating, elements of folk and popular music he had formerly shunned; thirdly, fortifying the role of leitmotif, reminiscence and reprise to the point where they could assert their traditional form-governing properties; and, fourthly, seeking ties between his operas and those of the 'classical', rather than the radical, Russian operatic tradition.

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3. The 1940s.

Prokofiev's next opera, *Obrucheniye v monastïre* ('Betrothal in a Monastery', composed 1940, after Sheridan's *The Duenna*), is usually looked upon as a kind of refuge in comedy, a retreat to a dramatic medium for which Prokofiev's methods were unquestionably suitable, and in which there could be no requirement for heroism. But even in this case there is evidence that Prokofiev consciously 'Sovietized' his style. This can best be seen if *Betrothal*

in a Monastery is compared with Prokofiev's other comic opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*. The earlier opera is pure grotesque, and virtually limited in its vocal style to through-composed prose recitative. The later is a lyrical romantic comedy with a heavy reliance on rounded vocal numbers to verse texts (some of them, it is true, inherited directly from Sheridan) and an equally heavy reliance on the device of reminiscence. Either opera could have been handled in either way; the difference in tone cannot be attributed solely to their literary sources.

Two unfinished projects of the 1940s also involved comic themes. *Khan Buzai*, subtitled 'But the Shah has a Horn!', was planned during summer 1942, during the composer's wartime evacuation to Alma-Ata, capital of the Kazakh SSR. Following a well-known Soviet tradition, it was to have been wholly based on the local folk music (compare Glier's *Shakh-Senem* and *Leyli i Medzhnun*, on Azerbaijani and Uzbek themes respectively), for which the composer could expect to be rewarded with the title 'People's Artist' from the republic in question, a lucrative honorific. At the time Prokofiev was working on three film scores simultaneously – Alma-Ata was the wartime location of the Mosfilm studio – and envisaged the *Khan Buzai* scenario as a series of brief cinematic 'shots'. In summer 1948, under the worst cloud of his career, Prokofiev made a last-ditch effort to compose an ideologically acceptable opera with *Dalyokiye morya* ('Distant Seas'), a sort of operetta with spoken dialogue after *Svadebnoye puteshestviye* ('The Wedding Expedition'), a popular situation comedy by one V. A. Dïkhovichnïy about young oceanographers in love. When *The Story of a Real Man* was suppressed for 'formalism' in December of that year a shattered Prokofiev gave up the project with only one scene sketched. It was his farewell to opera.

With *Voyna i mir* ('War and Peace', after Tolstoy), the effort to monumentalize was of course explicit, paramount and – in the opinion of many in the West – fatal. (Ironically, of course, it was just the opposite flaw, pettiness of form and concentration on genre detail, for which the composer was eternally harassed by the Stalinist cultural establishment.) The heroizing process may actually be traced, to the survival of documents from every stage of the opera's arduous gestation. Kutuzov's big aria in Scene 10 – the famous hymn to Moscow, later repeated to form the opera's grand choral finale, and a 'Lensky type' if ever there was one – can serve as object lesson. It was the most rewritten single item in the entire opera. The original conception had been a short arioso linked to the same character's arioso on the battlefield in Scene 8 (in *its* original conception) by shared leitmotivic material. It was conductor Samuil Samosud who goaded Prokofiev into expanding Kutuzov's big moment as befitted the character's manifest role as Stalin-surrogate. After many fruitless attempts, Prokofiev finally adapted a melody he had originally composed in an altogether different context, as part of the score to Sergey Eisenstein's film *Ivan the Terrible*. What was almost uncanny was the way Prokofiev's solution to the problem paralleled Musorgsky's process of revising the title character's central monologue ('I have attained the highest power') in *Boris Godunov*. In both instances declamation over a texture of leitmotifs was rejected in favour of lyrical melody borrowed from a previously composed work (in Musorgsky's case it was the unfinished opera *Salammbô*), and for the identical purpose: exaltation of tone and monumentalization of form.

The final stage of the process was reached in *Povest' o nastoyashchem cheloveke* ('The Story of a Real Man', 1947–8, after a novella by Boris Polevoy), the opera on which Prokofiev was working at the time of his official denunciation in the Zhdanovite 'Resolution on Music' of February 1948. The wish to placate is everywhere apparent. In keeping with the basic requirement of Socialist Realism that art be optimistic, this opera about the agony of an

aviator who lost his legs opens with the jolly music of Prokofiev's March for wind band, op.99. The score resounds from first to last with patriotic 'mass songs' and choruses. The dramaturgy and the characterization is at a childish level (as is the harmonic vocabulary, in keeping with Prokofiev's coerced promise in response to the Resolution). And yet even here the composer's basic urge to resolve the question of operatic form in favour of a through-composed 'scenic flow' persists, and finds a novel outlet in the opera's interesting adaptation of cinematic techniques (adumbrated in the *Khan Buzai* libretto) such as flashback and montage. Through their use Prokofiev managed convincingly to motivate a number of complex ensembles.

Despite all vicissitudes, then, Prokofiev's Soviet operas do not necessarily represent an unmitigated stylistic impoverishment. Setting *War and Peace*, by now a repertory item, alongside *The Gambler*, or especially *The Fiery Angel*, one can see the modifications he made in his methods and resources in response to external demands as introducing a new versatility into his operatic technique, legitimately enriching what had been a rather dogmatic and one-sided approach to musical drama.

See also Betrothal in a monastery; Fiery angel, the; Gambler, the; Love for three oranges, the; Maddalena; Semyon kotko; Story of a real man, the; and War and peace.
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operas unless otherwise stated

op.	title	genre, acts	libretto	first performance	sources and remarks
	Velikan [The giant]	3	Prokofiev and others	Kaluga guberniya, private home, sum. 1901	comp. 1900, MS vs dated 1900, unpubd
	Na pustïnnïkh ostrovakh [On Desert islands]	ov., 3 scenes of Act 1	Prokofiev		comp. 1900–02, MS vs dated Dec 1900, unpubd
	Pir vo vremya chumï [A Feast in Time of Plague]	1	Prokofiev, after A. S. Pushkin		MS vs dated July-Oct 1903, unpubd
	Undina	4	M. Kilstett, after F. de la Motte Fouqué		comp. 1904-7, partly scored, unpubd
	Pir vo vremya chumï [A Feast in Time of Plague]	1 scene	Prokofiev, after Pushkin		comp. 1908, unpubd
13	Maddalena	1	Prokofiev after M. G. Liven-Orlova	concert perf., Manchester, 22 Dec 1978 (broadcast BBC, London, 25 March 1979), cond. E. Downes; stage, Graz, Opernhaus, 28 Nov	comp. 1911–13, inc., vs (London, 1990); orchd E. Downes

				1981, cond. E. Downes	
24	Igrok [The Gambler]	4	Prokofiev, after F. Dostoyevsky	Brussels, Monnaie, 29 April 1929, cond. M. Corneil de Thoran; Russ. concert premièra, Leningrad radio, 1963, cond. G. Rozhdestvensky; stage, Moscow, Bol'shoy, 1974	comp. 1915–17, vs (St Petersburg, 1917); rev. 1927–8, vs (Berlin, 1930)
33	Lyubov'k tryom apel'sinam [The Love for Three Oranges]	prol., 4	Prokofiev, after C. Gozzi: *L'amore delle tre melarance*	Chicago, Auditorium, 30 Dec 1921, as L'amour des trois oranges; Russ. première, Leningrad, State Academic, 1926	comp. 1919, vs (Berlin, 1922), full score (london, 1981)
37	Ognennïy angel [The Fiery Angel]	5	Prokofiev, after V. Y. Bryusov	Venice, La Fenice, 14 Sept 1955, cond. N. Sanzogno; Act 2, abridged, Paris, Opéra, 14 June 1928, cond. S. Koussevitzky; complete, Paris, Champs-Elysées, 25 Nov 1954, cond. C. Bruck, as L'ange de feu; Russ. première, St Petersburg, Mariinsky, 29 Dec 1991, cond. Downes	comp. 1919–23, rev. 1926–7, vs (Moscow, 1985)
81	Semyon Kotko	5	Prokofiev and V. Katayev, after Katayev: *Ya sïn trudovogo naroda*	Moscow, Stanislavsky, 23 June 1940, cond. M. N. Zhukov	comp. 1939, vs (Moscow, 1960), full score (Moscow, 1967)
86	Obrucheniye v monastïre [Betrothal in a Monastery] (The Duenna)	'lyrico-comic' op, 4	Prokofiev and M. Mendel'son, after R. B. Sheridan: *The Duenna*	Prague, National, 5 May 1946; Russ. première, Leningrad, Kirov, 3 Nov 1946, cond. B. Khaikin	comp. 1940, vs (Moscow, 1944, 1960)
91	Voyna i mir [War and Peace]	13 'lyrico-dramatic scenes', choral epigraph	Prokofiev and Mendel'son, after L. Tolstoy		comp. 1941–52, vs and full score (Moscow, 1958); ed. in Collected Works, vi–vii (Moscow, 1958)
	orig. version	11 scenes		Moscow, Actor' Club, 16 Oct 1944, concert perf.; stage, Prague, National, 1948	
	expanded (two-evening) version	13 scenes		Leningrad, Malïy, 12 June 1946, cond. S. Samosud (Pt I, 8 scenes); dress rehearsal, July and Dec 1947 (Pt II)	
	abbreviated (one-evening) version	10 scenes		Florence, Maggio Musicale, 26 May 1953, cond. A. Rodziński	
	final version	13 scenes		Leningrad, Malïy, 1 April 1955, cond. E. Grikurov, heavily cut; Moscow, Bol'shoy, 15 Dec 1959, cond. A. Melik-Pashayev, first relatively complete perf., incl. epigraph	
	Khan Buzai				comp. 1942, inc. unpubd
117	Povest' o nastoyashchem cheloveke [The Story of a Real Man]	4	Prokofiev and Mendel'son, after B. Polevoy	private concert perf., Leningrad, Kirov, 3 Dec 1948, cond. Khaikin; stage, with cuts, Moscow, Bol'shoy, cond. M. F. Ermler, 8 Oct 1960	

Dalyokiye morya [Distant seas]	Prokofiev, after V. A. Dïkhovichnïy	comp. 1948, inc., unpubd

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Maddalena
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The Gambler

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