

Travels with an opera: Prokofiev's *War and Peace*

This is the story of two musical journeys: the road travelled by Prokofiev's late operatic masterpiece, from its initial composition in 1941/2 to the first performance of that original version – scheduled for 22 January 2010; and the present writer's forty-year journey away from, and then back to, the Russian composer and his operas.

My association with the music of Sergei Prokofiev began in 1966, when I had to choose a subject for my doctoral research at the University of Cambridge. I wanted to work on twentieth-century opera: Alban Berg was my first choice, but someone else (the musicologist Douglas Jarman) was already working on him. Martinu? Hindemith? – not really. Prokofiev? - now there was a composer about whose orchestral music I had mixed views, whose piano music I found fascinating but singularly awkward to play, and about whose operas I knew absolutely nothing. Zilch. Hasty research revealed that I was not alone: the March and Scherzo from *Love for Three Oranges* apart, Prokofiev's operatic repertoire was largely unknown and certainly unstudied in Western Europe. It seemed an excellent choice; though it was not long before I discovered that there were clear, if not good, reasons for both of these facts.

Throughout his life Prokofiev was captivated by opera as a medium: he wrote his first operatic work – *The Giant* – at the age of nine; and a fortnight before his death he was still trying to find the perfect middle section for Kutuzov's grandiose aria in *War and Peace*. A prolific composer in all genres, he completed twelve operas, eight of them more or less mature works and sketched out two or three more. Yet only two of these – *Love for Three Oranges* (1919) and *The Duenna* (1940/43), both of them comedies - were anything like successful in his lifetime, or in the years after his death. This seemed puzzling to me: Prokofiev was undoubtedly one of the most popular and effective composers of serious music in the twentieth century, and one whose music has both emotional and dramatic

intensity. I eventually found explanations, if not justifications, in a mixture of bad luck, bad timing and bad politics. With his earlier masterpiece *The Fiery Angel*, it was mainly bad timing – a libretto which didn't accord with Paris in the 1920s – which kept the opera off the stage until after Prokofiev's death. With *War and Peace*, however, it was all three, despite what must have seemed the perfect choice of plot by a great and sincerely patriotic composer at the start of the Great Patriotic War in 1941.

As for these operas being unstudied, I soon found out the many reasons for that. Scores were hard to find; recordings even more difficult. The works were in Russian (well, I had expected that, but not that four of them hadn't ever been translated): I had to learn that language. (It should be remembered that, in the 1960s fewer Russian operas were in Western repertoire, and were almost never sung in the original language.) Reference books on Prokofiev were few, and most of them were, yes, in Russian. As I was to discover, the operas were largely unstudied in Russia as well – though for different reasons.

Opera was potentially a very influential medium of propaganda in the Soviet era; as such it was subject to greater political scrutiny than other musical genre, and it was also liable to unpredictable changes in fortune – one has only to think of the sudden, total downfall from grace of Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* in 1936. In 1966, Prokofiev had been dead for thirteen years, but controversy about both him and his operas (especially the earlier ones) was very much alive: I remember being shown a black-and-white film of *The Gambler*, in the private cinema of the Composers' Union almost as if it were a piece of pornography! Israel Nestyev's biography – though admirable in many respects – was a typical example of contemporary circumspection on the subject.

Fortunately, manuscripts of the earlier operas, including his student work *Maddalena*, were in London, most of them in the possession of Boosey and Hawkes the publisher. I was lucky enough to have access to these and to others

of his personal papers, so that I became used to reading both his notation (very precise, extremely legible) and his idiosyncratic shorthand jottings. But the remainder of the manuscript material (all of the Soviet-period operas, as well as additional sketches and drafts for *The Gambler* and *The Fiery Angel*) was in Moscow, in the (then) Central State Archive of Literature and Art and the Glinka Museum. Most of the Prokofiev authorities of the time – Nestyev, Sabinina, Kholopov, Kholopova – were in Moscow. Both of Prokofiev's widows, Lena and Mira, were also in Moscow. It was clear that that was where my studies should continue.

Setting up a period of study in Moscow at the end of the 1960s was far from easy. There were many obstacles to getting appropriate visas. As a student, you could go only under an agreement between the UK Government and the Soviet Ministries of Culture and Higher Education, and I – being a music student, but in a University – fell between those two bodies; I was therefore qualified to stay in neither the hostel of the Moscow Conservatoire nor that of the University. You were strictly limited in the amount of currency you could take. You had to be vetted and briefed by the Foreign Office in London, and to agree to being debriefed after the visit: students from Cambridge – with its long track-record of espionage recruitment – were treated with particular suspicion, and this was true in Moscow too! And after all the arrangements had been sorted out, the train tickets bought and hotel accommodation agreed (the Hotel Berlin, across the street from the Lubyanka prison), there was that small contretemps in August 1968 between Russia and Czechoslovakia..... which meant cancelling my trip until February 1969.

In every way my studies in Moscow were rewarding. Whilst Mira Mendelson had died in 1968, I got to know Lina Prokofieva very well and that friendship continued when she came to live in London in the mid-seventies. I got hold of as many scores and recordings as I could, and spent many hours in the Lenin Library (on one occasion sitting next to Vyacheslav Mikhailevich Molotov –

though I didn't know it until the whisper went round Reading Room 1). But I needed access to the manuscripts, and this was not normally granted to Westerns. I'm not sure how I got this access – a lot of pleading by the British Embassy, my persistence in turning up at the door of the archive every day, help from the Composers' Union who maybe decided I was harmless enough? Even then I was told I couldn't see the operatic manuscripts, since Kabalevsky was editing a complete edition (which hasn't appeared to this day!).

The ladies at the archive took pity on me, however, and bit by bit let me have what I asked for. And it was really very interesting. There was a typewritten scenario for an early version of *The Fiery Angel*; the surviving bits of all of the childhood operas; the libretto for the opera *Khan Buzay*, started in 1946 but never finished, interspersed with the Kirghiz folksongs which Prokofiev had selected as its thematic material; and there were more than 700 pages of manuscript for the opera *War and Peace*, most of it in the Prokofiev fund 1929, list 1 folders 32 – 53. From this last, together with the material in the Glinka Museum funds 1, 33, 374 and 375, it was possible to piece together the story of the composition of *War and Peace* and its many revisions.

The full and complex history of the opera has been set out, most recently in great detail, by Nathan Sosen [*Music & Letters*, vol 90 (2009), no 3]; by a curious coincidence this article, which also calls for a reconstruction and critical assessment of the original version of the opera, was published just as I completed my reconstruction of it. The main facts of the story are clear from the evidence of the memoirs and the manuscripts. According to Lina Prokofieva, the idea of writing an opera based on the Tolstoy novel had first occurred to the composer in the mid-1930s; but it was not until early in 1941, inspired by his second wife Mira's reading of the novel to him and especially by the operatic potential of the scene of the wounded Prince Andrei, newly re-united with Natasha Rostova in the hut in Mitishchi, that he started work on it. In April 1941 he drafted a scenario for an opera in eleven scenes which charted the

relationships and changing fortunes of a small number of Tolstoy's huge cast of characters, in conditions of Peace, then War with Napoleon. Of these eleven scenes, nine were to remain in the first version of the opera.

The outbreak of War in Russia in June 1941 gave new relevance to the plot of *War and Peace* and new impetus to Prokofiev's operatic plans. With official approval and after his evacuation from Moscow to Nalchik, Prokofiev started work on the libretto (he worked on this with Mira Mendelson, retaining as much as they could of Tolstoy's prose) and the music. He composed quickly and enthusiastically, so that the entire piano score of eleven scenes and an overture was completed in eight months, between August 1941 and April 1942: this is the first version of the work (though even in the process of writing this, some revisions were made). The score was sent off to the Committee on the Arts in Moscow for approval. Meantime Prokofiev moved first to Tbilisi, then via Baku to Alma-Ata to work with Eisenstein on *Ivan the Terrible*; before he left Tbilisi in May 1942 he began the orchestration of *War and Peace*.

All of the Peace scenes, along with the scene of Andrei's death, had been orchestrated when the disappointing report from the Committee reached the composer: the lyricism of the Peace scenes was praised but Prokofiev was strongly advised to strengthen the patriotic aspect of the War scenes, with heroic arias and extended choral numbers. The composer complied, revising the music and completing the orchestration more or less simultaneously. A new introductory choral Epigraph was composed; and whilst the Peace scenes were largely unchanged, scenes 7 and 11 were completely re-worked – conversational episodes were removed, ariosos, marches and choruses were added; scene 9 also lost its 'ordinary' characters, but acquired fleeing French actors and brought Napoleon and his entourage into the midst of the burning city. So, with this second version of the opera, published in mimeograph form by Muzfond in 1943 (originally without the Epigraph), the whole balance of the opera began to shift,

from focusing upon the individual and intimate to emphasising the national and the tableauxque.

The process of transforming *War and Peace* into a work which might find favour with the Party had begun. Over the next ten years, until Prokofiev's death in 1953 there were to be at least three more versions along with continual revisions of detail; two more scenes were added, now scenes 2 and 10; the last scene (13) acquired an extended choral finale. With each revision the opera became less a dramatic interplay of individual characters and more an epic patriotic cantata, in uncut form lasting four hours and spanning two evenings in the theatre. The extent of the transformation is epitomised by the character of Kutuzov: in the first version a weary and worn old man, by no means the Tsar's first choice as leader, but beloved by the people and humorous with his soldiers, who expresses the futility of strategy; in the final version the supreme strategist and saviour of the nation (as was Stalin), to whom the figures of Napoleon and the French soldiers became merely foils and parodies.

Prokofiev's opera never did find favour with the Party, however: the many revisions to his score, made in increasing desperation as the years passed, always lagged behind changing Stalinist policies. The first part of the opera (scenes 1-8) was produced by the Maly Theatre in Leningrad in 1946; but whilst most of the scenes were performed at various times either with piano or in concert form, Prokofiev never lived to see the whole opera on stage.

Back to 1969: I completed my studies in Moscow, and in 1970 submitted the finished dissertation. I tried for publication, but in the early 1970s the subject of Prokofiev's operas was considered too arcane for a book. There were several performances of these works in the years that followed: *Oranges*, *War and Peace*, and *Maddalena* in London; *The Gambler* in Wexford in Ireland. I wrote about all of these and other Prokofiev works, and did a number of radio broadcasts on the subject. Gradually, however, other career interests took over.

I became involved in electronic composition, studying in Utrecht and then setting up a studio in the University of Edinburgh. Later, I became Director of Music and later Vice-Principal at the Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, which left me with little excess time or energy for Prokofiev research.

But my relationship with Russia and with Russian music did not go away. In 1985 I had six months' sabbatical leave, and spent half of it in Yerevan, Tbilisi and Kiev as well as Moscow and Leningrad searching for new ensemble works by interesting young composers, which were then performed in Edinburgh. In 1991 I came to Russia again, to take part in conferences for the centenary of Prokofiev's birth, and in the process set up a staff and student exchange between the RSAMD and the St Petersburg Conservatoire. This exchange lasted for more than a decade, and in its last years became the forerunner of the present *Celtic-Cossack Connections* project, involving the RSAMD and the Rostov State Rakhmaninov Conservatoire. Discussions between Glasgow and Rostov had started many years earlier, when the two cities were twinned, but it was only when a European Union grant award made staff and student exchanges and joint performances financially possible, that the association between the two Conservatoires, along with the two national opera companies, became a creative reality.

Whilst *Celtic-Cossack Connections* also encompasses new music, jazz and traditional folk music, the kernel of the project is its opera strand. The RSAMD was eager to extend the repertoire and cultural experience of its opera students; the Rostov State Conservatoire wished to expose its singers to the holistic rehearsal and stage training, and to the language coaching that Glasgow offered. Both conservatoires looked to the possibility of performing together works which would have been impossible for them to do on their own. Such performances were two years in the planning; but in January 2009 students from Rostov and Yerevan joined the RSAMD production of Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges* in

Glasgow and Edinburgh. Then in April 2009 five students from Glasgow came to Rostov to sing in Richard Strauss' *Ariadne auf Naxos* and Britten's *Phaedra*.

The idea of reconstructing the first version of *War and Peace* had been discussed between the conductor Timothy Dean and myself over several years – in a hypothetical kind of way; but now there was a real opportunity to make the idea work. So for me it was back to the archives in Moscow. Apart from its name (it was now the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art) and a bit of interior redecoration, nothing in the affecting the study of the manuscripts of *War and Peace* seemed to have changed in forty years: same microfilms, same (now broken) microfilm readers. The sections of the score crucial to the reconstruction were identified, and with the permission of the archive Directorate and the help of the British Council in Moscow were couriered to Glasgow.

Reconstructing the musical notes was not especially difficult. Prokofiev's scores are meticulous; rarely is an accidental missed; the piano score is in pencil, written with confidence; where there are indications of orchestration they are both clear and comprehensive – though for the original version there are few of these, since he had no need to score the sections he was discarding. A new vocal score was completed first, on a cut-and-paste basis, working on to the published editions (with the permission of both the Prokofiev estate and Boosey and Hawkes): one score in English with Russian transliteration for Glasgow; one in Russian for the Rostov performance.

Then on to the orchestration. This was more daunting – you don't orchestrate original Prokofiev every day, or approach the task lightly! I took some weeks to try to reassure myself that I was the appropriate person to do it, and that I could do it, then just gritted my teeth and started. There were about 450 bars in all to be orchestrated, along with a large numbers of 'joins' to be made – where new sections had been inserted. I took as many clues as I could from the final, published score (Muzgiz, 1958), orchestrating recurring themes in related

colours. I orchestrated as far as possible according to the thematic structures of the music, taking full advantage of Prokofiev's love of repetitions, ostinati and recurring rhythmic motives. In the recitative and declamatory sections of his operas – and these were in the main the sections in *War and Peace* he discarded after 1942 - he always went for immediate musical characterisation, and often this was in the orchestration as well as the musical motives.

I knew his favoured orchestral instruments: his fondness for flutes, bassoons and tubas; for muted trumpets and cuivré horns. He loved the sound of low bass chords, and of woodwind doubling at the double octave. I knew that his use of percussion was surprisingly restrained, as was his use of the full orchestral body. And that in building up orchestral climaxes he would 'layer' his textures, often through the combination of two or more ostinati, and would intensify the music in phases of increasing energy. This structuring was the model for the longest and most exposed part of the new orchestration: the partisans' attack on the retreating French army in the last scene – which was completely rewritten in the revision process. Interestingly, in its original version this section bears more than a passing resemblance to the Scherzo in *Love for Three Oranges*.

I have no doubt that I learned more about the composer from this reconstruction than from anything else – over all the years I have studied his music. Despite some, in the end quite superficial, changes in idiom – his earlier works were undoubtedly more dissonant, his earlier rhythms were more insistent, his earlier harmonies even less predictable, and he was in altogether more of a hurry as a younger composer – Prokofiev remained always true to himself and to his craft. The original version of *War and Peace* exhibits all the musical characteristics that make Prokofiev's music not just distinctive, but totally unmistakable: its typical gestures and motives; its repetitions, refrains and ostinato rhythms; its wit and musical caricature; its total musical self confidence.

If there is a Why? about reconstructing and performing this first version of an opera of which Prokofiev thought highly, and to which he returned again and again over the last two decades of his life, then it is not because it contains all of the best music written for the work. It does not, either, contain all of the weakest – that dubious honour must surely belong to the mammoth final version, where stylistic consistency is challenged by the many insertions and later additions it had to encompass. But there are strong reasons for uncovering the original score, quite apart from any comparative judgements on musical worth.

The first is that it was Prokofiev's primary, sincere, coherent and carefully researched operatic concept of Tolstoy: verbally, musically and structurally he meant his opera to be the work he first composed. The long chain of revisions which followed was made with increasing reluctance. The earliest revisions, made before the first version was even complete, were done on the well-meaning advice of the musicologist Semyon Shlifstein. It was Sergei Eisenstein who persuaded Prokofiev to augment the War scenes with lyrical ariosos and choruses, and to introduce the cinematic blizzard which replaced the dramatically powerful sight of pairs of desolate, retreating French soldiers in the final scene. It was the conductor Samosud who suggested the means of heroically elevating Kutuzov, and the additional of the large choral finale; and Samosud, too, who pressured him to compose the new Ball scene (2) and – by this time much against Prokofiev's better judgement – the scene of the War Council at Fili (scene 10 in the final version). The rest of the changes and proposed cuts made by the composer in his last years were done in his sheer desperation to have the work performed, and in extreme ill health.

Secondly the original work offers the perspective necessary for musical directors to decide which version of the music to perform. Since 1953 the opera has had many performances throughout the world, and in as many versions as there have been directors. With such a background of re-writings, there is truly no one 'authentic' version of *War and Peace*. Certainly the performance of the whole of

the final version (and Gergiev comes close to it) is perhaps the least satisfactory solution, both musically and dramatically, and each of the alternative cut versions Prokofiev proffered towards the end of his life is in some respect an artistic compromise. The availability of the first version at least enables directors and conductors to make a fully informed choice. And the original score may also appeal to small companies without the resources to stage some of the more extravagant later scenes (undoubtedly a key reason for the opera reaching the stage less frequently than the music warrants).

The mixed fortunes of the composer's operatic works, some might say, were due not only to bad luck. Prokofiev had a somewhat idiosyncratic and personal concept of opera and operatic dramaturgy which, over the years, has drawn almost as much criticism as praise from his reviewers. This concept remained consistent, from *The Gambler* to *The Story of a Real Man*, so that, despite contrasting plots and changing musical idiom, there are features common to all of his operas – they can be glimpsed even in the childhood works. He seemed to relate primarily to text; he was his own librettist and the actual words of his literary subjects were often his first inspiration. Accordingly, his operas are full of conversations, and these conversations are typically declaimed against a supporting musical narrative, most often patterned with layers of ostinati and with motives which act as both as structural refrains and as musical character-sketches. The music is usually sectional: when one subject of conversation is finished, another starts in a similar format. The declamation is usually tuneful, if restrained, and – this being Prokofiev - moments of great lyricism emerge, or break through; the set aria, ensemble or chorus is, however, seldom the composer's natural impulse. Tolstoy's epic novel was undoubtedly an unwieldy choice for an opera libretto but the original, the most personal version of the work, shows Prokofiev not only at his most typical but it is closest to Tolstoy's literary concept of portraying history through the random feelings and interactions of characterful, 'ordinary' individuals.

The original score of *War and Peace* is, quite simply, vintage Prokofiev and for that reason alone its performance is long overdue. It has been a privilege for me to be part of its restoration, and to be able give back to Prokofiev a small token of appreciation for his role in shaping my life.

The opera will have its première in this form, in Russian, in the Theatre Royal in Glasgow on 22 January 2010, with students from the Opera Schools of the RSAMD, the Rostov State Conservatoire and its exchange partner the Komitas State Conservatoire in Yerevan. It will be accompanied by the orchestra of Scottish Opera. Thereafter this original version of the work will come to Rostov-on-Don where the first complete and uncut public performance will be given in semi-staged form on 11 March 2010, in the Rostov State Musical Theatre.

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