

## PROGRAM NOTES

by Phillip Huscher

### **Sergei Prokofiev**

Born April 23, 1892, Sontsovka, Ukraine.

Died March 5, 1953, Moscow.

### **Symphony No. 4 in C Major, Op. 112**

Prokofiev began his Fourth Symphony in 1929 and completed it the following year. The first performance was given on November 14, 1930, in Boston. The score was published as op. 47. Prokofiev substantially revised the work in 1947 and rereleased it as op. 112. The BBC gave a studio performance in March 1950, but the first concert performance was not given until January 5, 1957, in Moscow, after the composer's death. The score of the revised version calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and english horn, two clarinets, E-flat clarinet and bass clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones and tuba, triangle, woodblock, tambourine, side drum, bass drum, cymbals, harp, piano, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's only previous subscription concert performances of Prokofiev's Fourth Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on December 17, 18, and 19, 1987, with Neeme Järvi conducting. The Orchestra has performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival only once, on August 12, 1976, with Lawrence Foster conducting.

There are two Fourth Symphonies by Prokofiev, composed some seventeen years apart. The first was written during the winter of 1929–30, on the coattails of Prokofiev's final ballet for Diaghilev, *The Prodigal Son*. The second—the one performed this week—began simply enough, as a revision of a symphony that had never quite satisfied the composer, but it turned into a work so different in scale and impact that it could almost stand on its own as a new symphony. Prokofiev didn't give it a new number, of course—it is too clearly a reworking of an earlier piece rather than a new composition altogether. But he did republish it with a new opus number, 112, which places it directly after his Sixth Symphony in the chronology of his output. (Returning to the same subject matter again and again, as Böcklin did in *The Isle of the Dead*, a commonplace in the visual arts, is relatively rare in music.)

This tale of two symphonies begins with a commission from the Boston Symphony Orchestra to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in 1930. Perhaps Prokofiev wasn't yet in the mood to compose a new symphony—his Third was less than a year old at the time—but he was insulted by the offer from Boston music director Serge Koussevitzky, who had already become one of the composer's most generous champions. "For one thousand dollars," Prokofiev responded, "you can order a symphony from Lazar or Tansman, but I find it awkward to accept such a commission. Prokofiev is paid three to five thousand dollars for a symphony, or even for the right to announce that 'we've commissioned it from him'." Prokofiev was unmoved by the news that Stravinsky had accepted the same sum (for the work that would turn out to be his landmark *Symphony of Psalms*). Why didn't the orchestra just play his latest work, the *Sinfonietta*, instead, he asked—or buy the manuscript of a new piece for \$1,000 instead of commissioning it. Finally, Koussevitzky lost patience:

I must tell you that in spite of all my propaganda during these last five years, your name is not so popular as that of Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, nor so popular that I can transport my orchestra to New York to give a Prokofiev festival. This doesn't mean that festivals should be given only to honor the dead—I hope that I will live to a time when a

festival will be given in your honor—but we must be patient and not allow any silly little things, any pleasant nonentities, like your Sinfonietta, to be performed.

During the winter of 1929–30, as Prokofiev gradually worked his way across the United States on a long concert tour, he and Koussevitzky continued their discussions, both parties finally agreeing to the original conditions, and Prokofiev eventually began his new symphony, often writing aboard the trains that took him from one city to another. He appeared with the Chicago Symphony twice that February, playing his First and Second piano concertos (he had made his debut with the orchestra in 1918 in the U.S. premiere of the First, and returned in 1921 to give the world premiere of the Third Piano Concerto). He also gave five concerts with the Boston Symphony that winter, so he and Koussevitzky either had already patched up their differences or they chose to work them out making music together. Prokofiev returned to Paris in time for summer, and he finished the Fourth Symphony there, just before retreating to the French countryside for the month of August.

When he composed his previous symphony, the Third, Prokofiev discovered a collage-like way of composing, which allowed him to incorporate whole chunks of his opera *The Flaming Angel* into an entirely new composition. Now, in his Fourth Symphony, he developed the process further, drawing upon themes and material from his recent ballet *The Prodigal Son*, Diaghilev's last production with the Ballets Russes before his sudden death in August 1929. Although the ballet had been a success, with choreography by Balanchine and designs by Georges Rouault, Prokofiev evidently felt that his music deserved a symphonic framework. When Koussevitzky expressed his concern that Prokofiev was again raiding his theater work for the concert hall, Prokofiev argued that Beethoven had done the same thing when he based the finale of his *Eroica* Symphony on his ballet music for *The Creatures of Prometheus*. (Haydn, too, had reused entire movements from his incidental music for *Il distratto* in his sixtieth symphony that now uses the play's name as its subtitle.) Later, Prokofiev also said that his new symphony incorporated a significant amount of music originally written for *The Prodigal Son* but never included in the ballet.

The Boston premiere of Prokofiev's Fourth Symphony in November 1930 was indifferently received, to the composer's surprise—the following year, clearly piqued by the public's response, he told a French reporter that he thought his most recent works were his best, singling out both *The Prodigal Son* and the Fourth Symphony. For the next fourteen years, Prokofiev avoided the form of the symphony altogether. Then, in the mid-40s, he composed two—the heroic Fifth, in 1944, and the Sixth, a wartime lament, in 1945–46. It was then that he decided to rethink the Fourth and began the process of turning a modest symphony into a large and imposing score that matched the scale of the two new symphonies.

The revised Fourth Symphony is half again as long as the original. Some of it is entirely new, such as the forceful introduction that now precedes the quiet opening of the earlier score. Some of it expands on what was already there, such as the elaborate first-movement development section, which is four times as long (and manages to weave the new introduction into the interplay of older material). Some of it is simply redecorating—a few measures here, a new transition there. Many passages remain unchanged or just slightly reorchestrated. (Prokofiev's 1947 orchestra is marginally larger than the one he called for seventeen years earlier—there is now an E-flat clarinet, for example, as well as a third trumpet, harp, and piano.) The entire first movement is a characteristic Prokofiev landscape, with ardent lyricism giving way to bracing, highly charged music (originally given to the *Prodigal Son*'s false friends, who fleece him when they get their chance).

The slow movement grew out of music Prokofiev wrote to accompany the *Prodigal*'s return home, where he is taken in by his forgiving father. It features one of the big expressive tunes at which Prokofiev excelled—"I have become simpler and more melodic," he told the critic Olin Downes in 1930, saying that he was tired of being pigeonholed as the enfant terrible who wrote abrasive, dissonant works.

The third movement began life as the dance for the Beautiful Maiden who seduces the *Prodigal Son* (this, a departure from the biblical story, was added to the ballet scenario for its dance opportunities and, well, sex appeal). Both versions of this movement borrow this graceful, sensual music, almost unchanged, from the ballet score. In 1947, Prokofiev added a wonderful coda.

“The finale was the most difficult part,” Prokofiev later said. Of the four movements, this is one that was most substantially rewritten in 1947. It is based on music originally composed to express the Prodigal’s eagerness to escape his home and family, and to give a sense of his youth and passion. For Prokofiev, who had left his own homeland in his twenties only to return some two decades later, it is also, in part, a self-portrait.

*Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.*

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