Sergei Prokofiev  
Born April 23, 1891, Sontsovka, Ukraine. 
Died March 5, 1953, Moscow, Russia. 

Symphony No. 6 in E-flat Minor, Op. 111

Prokofiev began sketching his sixth symphony in 1944 and completed the score in February 1947. The first performance was given on October 11, 1947, in Leningrad. The orchestra consists of 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, timpani, triangle, cymbals, tambourine, snare drum, wood block, bass drum, tam-tam, piano, harp, celesta, and strings. Performance time is approximately forty-three minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra's first subscription concert performances of Prokofiev's Sixth Symphony were given at Orchestra Hall on January 4, 5, and 9, 1951, with Eugene Ormandy conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on January 11, 12, 13, and 16, 1990, with Michael Morgan conducting. The Orchestra has performed this symphony at the Ravinia Festival only once, on July 7, 1960, with Walter Hendl conducting.

In January 1945, Sergei Prokofiev conducted the premiere of his Fifth Symphony. It was a tremendous success and one of the high points in his career. Several days later, the composer blacked out, fell down a flight of stairs, and suffered a concussion. (Undiagnosed high blood pressure was the apparent cause.) He was hospitalized for four months in a sanitarium outside Moscow, but after his doctors released him, he was never quite the same. He stopped composing completely for a while, and even after he returned to work, he moved at an uncharacteristically sluggish pace. The triumphant premiere of the Fifth Symphony turned out to be his last appearance as a conductor.

Before he had even finished his Fifth Symphony, Prokofiev had begun to sketch a new symphony in E-flat minor. It was the first big work that he returned to after his accident, and he completed it early in 1947. But where his Fifth Symphony had been an uplifting piece written during the Second World War—a “hymn to free and happy Man, to his mighty powers, his pure and noble spirit,” as the composer put it—the Sixth Symphony, completed some two years later, was, perhaps inevitably, more nuanced and shadowed, and emotionally more complex. As Prokofiev told the Soviet biographer Israel Nestyev,

Now we are rejoicing in our great victory, but each of us has wounds which cannot be healed. One man's loved ones have perished, another has lost his health. This must not be forgotten.

Prokofiev gave his new symphony the opus number 111, the same as Beethoven’s extraordinary last piano sonata, which Prokofiev loved, and he even contemplated dedicating the score to Beethoven. (Prokofiev’s Second Symphony, composed more than two decades earlier, had been inspired by the unconventional two-part structure of that sonata.)

The symphony was performed for the first time in Leningrad in October 1947—Prokofiev’s doctors allowed him to travel from Moscow to hear the premiere—and it was received with respect, if not with the outright enthusiasm that had greeted the Fifth. When the Sixth was repeated that December in Moscow, the audience, according to Pravda, was “very appreciative.” But Andrei Zhdanov, Stalin's musical “authority,” had particularly harsh words for Prokofiev, whom he said still believes in “innovation for innovation’s sake.” He has an artistic snobbishness, a false fear of being commonplace and ordinary. It is curious to observe the struggle of the two
Several days later, on February 11, 1948, the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a now-famous declaration condemning the recent works by Prokofiev, along with those by Dmitri Shostakovich, Aram Khachaturian, and others whose names are less well known to us today—all “distinguished by formalist perversions and antidemocratic tendencies alien to the Soviet people and to their aesthetic requirements.” (Around this same time, Boris Pasternak, a friend of Prokofiev—they were a year apart in age—who also was under intense official pressure, began his own personal response to the political situation in the novel Doctor Zhivago, which Prokofiev would not live to read.)

Suddenly, Prokofiev’s recent compositions were being ignored. Sviatoslav Richter, Prokofiev’s favorite pianist and the leading interpreter of his piano works, substituted music by Schubert for the announced premiere of Prokofiev’s Ninth Piano Sonata. (Richter finally gave the first performance more than three years later, in April 1951.) Within six months of its premiere, the Sixth Symphony dropped out of the repertory and was not heard again in the Soviet Union for many years. (The symphony was first published in New York in 1949; the American premiere was given that November by the New York Philharmonic, and the Chicago Symphony played it in January 1951.) As Prokofiev sensed, as long as Stalin was alive, the composer would never regain his hold on musical life in his homeland. As it turned out, Prokofiev died less than an hour before Stalin on March 5, 1953.

In Israel Nestyev’s official Soviet biography of Prokofiev, published in 1957, four years after the composer’s death, the Sixth Symphony is still branded as “perhaps the most difficult and complex work Prokofiev composed during the Soviet period,” words that do not entirely jibe with the music itself. Prokofiev himself had offered a short, if unrevealing, summary of the symphony’s three movements while he was still in the process of orchestrating the last two:

The first movement is of an agitated character, at times lyrical, at times austere; the second movement, Largo, is brighter and more songful; the finale, rapid and in a major key, is close in character to my Fifth Symphony, save for reminiscences of the austere passages in the first movement.

The first movement is, as Nestyev writes, the most tragic of the three. It is a complex and unpredictably structured paragraph, mixing melancholy pastoral music with grim and strident marches. It begins fortissimo, with muted brass, and ends pianissimo over an ominous drum roll, and Prokofiev covers wide-ranging territory in between (even the tempo changes restlessly in the last pages, switching back and forth between allegro and andante).

The slow middle movement opens with an outburst that ultimately gives way to grand, sweeping, lyrical music that would not be out of place in Prokofiev’s magnificent Romeo and Juliet ballet score. This is overwhelmed by the warlike sounds of fanfares and drumrolls, but the movement ends quietly, if indecisively, with solo oboe and muted trumpet over unsettled chords.

The finale is music of optimism, though not without a sense of “wounds which cannot be healed.” Nestyev called it a “rollicking, athletically vigorous Vivace.” But in the coda, Prokofiev brings us back to the “sad, pipelike melody of the first movement, the ominous image of war’s fury” (Nestyev’s words), and to the grim reminder of reality. The very end sweeps all that aside, but the memory still lingers.

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