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## PROKOFIEV'S WAR & PEACE

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### 1. *War and Peace*: a monumental challenge

- Tolstoy's novel is immense, with hundreds of characters and a complex network of plot lines; it hovers between fiction and non-fiction, he often steps outside the story, and even closes the novel with an essay on the philosophy of history
- The libretto was created by Prokofiev and Mira Mendelson, reflecting on the story of their own love
- Prokofiev relished the challenge of setting texts that most composers would have considered unsingable

### 2. Prokofiev, the recent émigré

- Prokofiev had spent almost two decades abroad and only began to re-establish his life in the Soviet Union in 1935, settling permanently in 1936 (without the possibility of further emigration)
- Despite his privileged position, critics said that had "still to unpack his suitcases" – in their eyes, he still had to undergo transformation into a real Soviet citizen and artist
- Various projects remained unrealised, and his monumental *Cantata for the 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Revolution* was left unperformed because of official misgivings
- Prokofiev's film score/cantata *Alexander Nevsky* convinced the authorities that he was capable of producing Socialist Realist art, but his name was still absent from the list of co-artists in the film's nomination for a Stalin Prize
- even his successful cantata *Zdravitsa*, written for Stalin's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, did not entirely dispel official distrust

### 3. *War and Peace*: from a private project to a national project

- The German invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 lent the opera project a new importance and topicality
- the minister Khrapchenko was a Tolstoy scholar, and became heavily involved
- demands for revision were spelled out in an unusually detailed manner by Khrapchenko and the musicologist Semyon Shlifstein
- The list of revisions kept expanding, Prokofiev never actually signed off on the final version, even though the opera was in a complete, performable state – only his death stopped the process

### 4. The "Peace" Scenes

- a coherent story of Natasha's engagement to Andrey, her elopement with Anatole and its consequences
- there were gaps in the story (in the first version there is no scene of N. and A.'s first meeting), but Prokofiev could rely on the audience's thorough knowledge of the novel
- Tolstoy often endows his characters with a descriptive phrase that represents them throughout the novel; Prokofiev matches this in his sharply characterised music
- there are two types of melodies, one based on speech patterns (in the manner of Musorgsky), the other a kind of free arioso that Prokofiev shapes to the realistic dialogue
- Prokofiev's melodies contain many wide intervals, together with a tight chromaticism and echoes of Romanticism
- Tolstoy's psychological exploration of his characters is reflected in Prokofiev's use of the orchestra



- The scene at Anatole's gives a negative character some space, and allows him to present his own web of psychological explanations

## 5. The original “War” scenes

- The emphasis is also on individual characters, as in Peace scenes, but often presented in a kaleidoscopic succession
- The difference, compared to the “Peace” scenes, is the addition of folk-style music for choruses
- An expression of Tolstoy's philosophy of history: history is made by everyone, but through a confluence of myriad events that is not controlled by anyone

## 6. The Revisions

- The letter from the Minister outlined the changes in general terms, the musicologist's letter elaborated the details (see Appendix). Most of the changes concerned the War scenes
- Prokofiev had often worked to commission, e.g. in writing ballets for Diaghilev or film scores, such as *Alexander Nevsky* under the supervision of Eisenstein. He did not automatically disdain requests for revision and was sometimes even inspired by them
- In this case, however, his patience was sorely tested. The 1948 Resolution against formalism cut across the period of composition on *War and Peace*, and left its mark on it

## 7. The two resulting styles

- The more modernist style that Prokofiev had originally envisaged is diluted by pastiche numbers in the traditions of Russian classical opera (Tchaikovsky, Musorgsky, Borodin)
- in some of the scenes the switching of style is immediately noticeable, e.g. Andrei's death scene, which is made to incorporate the waltz theme and the theme of Kutuzov's “Moscow” arioso

## 8. So, who was right?

- *War and Peace* in its final form is a collaboration between Prokofiev and several State advisors
- The original version is undoubtedly more unified in conception and style, but many of the numbers that emerged from the revisions became audience favourites, and it is hard for productions to abandon all of these
- The inclusion of the Ball Scene (No. 2) in the revisions does actually improve the storyline, especially for foreign audiences that will generally be less familiar with the novel
- The new symphonic climax depicting the burning of Moscow is hard to fault for its emotional impact
- The “accessibility” demanded by the Soviet authorities is something that is appreciated by opera audiences today (and no less by the audiences for Prokofiev's symphonic and ballet music, where the Soviet works have become far more popular than his pre-Soviet works)

## Summary

Prokofiev's choice of Tolstoy's historical novel guaranteed as the basis for his new opera guaranteed on several counts that the authorities would take the keenest interest in the work, with all that that entailed. The figure of Marshal Kutuzov, leader of the victorious Russian army against the French, was already treated with reverence as one of Marshal Stalin's historical prototypes (Russian nationalism and the leadership cult now formed the preferred ideology of social cohesion – the history of the Revolution posed too many awkward questions). The scenario of an invading army advancing far into Russian territory had immediate parallels with the Nazi invasion and required appropriately morale-raising treatment. Tolstoy himself now occupied first place in the Stalinist literary pantheon, raising the stakes further for the opera.

Prokofiev's had not originally intended to write the sprawling grand opera that eventually emerged after years of haggling with the committees. He had initially been attracted to psychological complexity of Tolstoy's characters, and to the care Tolstoy took over the details of everyday life. And for Prokofiev, Tolstoy's prosaic, unoperatic language was an attraction rather than an obstacle, since he too was an heir to the Musorgskian tradition of text setting. While the naturalistic method suited Tolstoy's dialogue, what of Tolstoy's frequent examinations of his



characters' inner lives? Prokofiev took a different approach here, developing these passages as arioso asides. "How can they execute me, kill me, take my life away – me, Pierre Bezukhov, with all my thoughts, hopes, strivings, memories?" sings Pierre in what he thinks are his last moments. Prokofiev's arioso rendition of this and many other such ruminations asides is a strikingly fresh device on the operatic stage, but perfectly suited to the medium. The great length of the novel, of course, meant that Prokofiev could not hope to present all Tolstoy's characters in their full psychological richness, but here he was assisted by the fact that the members of his (Russian) audience would be well acquainted with the novel, and would automatically fill in the lacunae with their knowledge.

By April 1942, Prokofiev had completed the vocal score of his first version, a patchwork of brief episodes, largely a mixture of Musorgskian dialogue with Prokofiev's arioso asides. But there were other elements, even in Prokofiev's first version, that had played little part in Prokofiev's previous operas, but which were familiar to all composers working within the rules of Socialist Realism (Prokofiev had been afforded some leeway in his previous Soviet operas). These rules affected both style, which had to lean heavily on the "Russian classics" from Glinka to Tchaikovsky, and form, requiring the appearance of various set pieces (such as the choral songs of Prokofiev's war scenes). The tuneful retrospective style and the use of set pieces came to predominate in the later revisions, edging the opera closer to the Socialist Realist ideal; the Ball scene, for example, added during the revisions of 1945/46, provides space for a series of Tchaikovskian dances, although Prokofiev still manages to personalize the music with characteristic pungency in the harmony and orchestration.

The "war" section of the opera had to undergo the most drastic changes. The character of Kutuzov, in particular, had to be given much more weight, and among other things, a new scene was added, "The council at Fili", in which Kutuzov shows his wisdom as a military leader and then breaks out into a heroic, patriotic aria. This was the scene's centerpiece, and its main theme, which Prokofiev had recycled from one of his film scores, made a triumphant return in the choral apotheosis at the close of the opera. All the extra material required to satisfy the committees made the opera too unwieldy and it was split into two parts, to be performed in the course of two consecutive evenings. Only the first part was performed during Prokofiev's lifetime; exasperatingly, the second part, featuring Kutuzov and Napoleon still made the officials too nervous, even though Nazi Germany had been defeated several years earlier – such was their fear of Stalin's disapproval. While the years of revision severely tested Prokofiev's patience, he was generally able to make a virtue of necessity, and in the end produced one of a handful of Socialist Realist classics, still performed and enjoyed today long after the demise of Socialist Realism.

## APPENDIX 1

### LETTER FROM THE MUSICOLOGIST SEMYON SHLIFSTHEYN TO PROKOFIEV

(transl. by M. Frolova-Walker and J. Walker)

Dear Sergei Sergeevich,

In addition to M.B. Khrapchenko's letter, I would like to share with you my thoughts on your opera and suggest a number of desirable revisions. I will begin with the music that depicts the personal world of the characters. This part of the opera was liked by everyone and, I can say, was unanimously approved. At last, you were recognized as a lyric artist. On my part, I would say that both Natasha and Bolkonsky came out extremely well (Pierre much less so). All of the music for Natasha and Andrey in the first scene is true poetry. Natasha's arioso in Scene 2 is wonderful in beauty of its vocal line, the whole of Scene 3 (the ball at Bezukhov's) is exceptionally poetic, and Natasha's arietta is marvellously touching. The following waltz and the whole episode of Anatole's confession to Natasha - once again this is poetry itself. Everyone who has seen this was in raptures. Some future soprano – Shpiller or Kruglikova – will thank you for Natasha. And you rarely get this from singers. Scene 5, between Pierre and Natasha, also leaves a very good impression. The secondary characters are very expressive, in particular, Balaga in Scene 4.

The essential shortcoming of this scene [4] is the abundance of talking (the same in Scenes 2 and 6). Thus, for example, I find the episode about the defrocked priest not very interesting musically, and dramatically insignificant;



the same with the dialogue that begins with the words “Where is Khvostikov?”, continuing until the end of the scene.

In Scene 6, Pierre’s ruminations about helping one’s neighbour and about Masonic brotherhood caused a negative reaction. In the depiction of Pierre, I think you need to remove whatever is coming from a Tolstoyan romantic (for example, talk about the immortal soul in the Scene 8). You need to show Pierre saving Natasha, Pierre as a sincerely noble man, ready for heroic deeds.

In Scene 2, a phrase of Count Rostov “I would nip over to Sobachya [Dogs] Square, it’s very near here”, seems unnecessary. Such details are superfluous in an opera, unless it they are connected to some particular element of characterization of a situation or a hero, and this [justification] is clearly absent in this instance.

In Scene 9 (Andrey’s death) there are two moments that cause disagreement: in his delirium, Andrey exclaims “Piti, piti”, and “ti, ti” – these exclamations are clearly ridiculous, they will either have to be replaced or deleted altogether. Natasha’s words “Why too much?” – in response to Andrey’s confession of love, destroy the seriousness of the situation and the poetry of this moment.

Now about the second part of the opera, which is immediately connected with the theme of the Patriotic war of 1912, the theme, which, as Mikhail Borisovich Khrapchenko rightly points out, should be the leading theme of the opera. There is much good music in Scene 7. The beginning of the scene, representing the Borodino field (in B flat minor) is very impressive. The episode of the Russian troops passing though also leaves a very good impression. Kutuzov’s music is excellent, the chorus of the home guard, the Cossack song – all of this breathes strength and contains a truly Russian element.

The shortcoming of Scene 7 is the presence of many conversational episodes. I think that the conversation between Pierre and Fyodor about death is uninteresting and unnecessary (it is not clear what the role of such a conversation could be in the whole dramatic conception); [likewise] Andrey’s question about the Masonic brotherhood, the dialogue between Dolokhov and Kutuzov.

The very tone of the portrayal of the people also causes serious doubts (this is, once again, about the first half of Scene 7). All these ... [colloquial and dialect words] could possibly serve as a colourful addition to the musical characterization of the people (but even then, only carefully rationed), but they should not be the main feature [characterizing the people]. However, in the whole of the first half of Scene 7, except for the B-flat major chorus of the home guard the people are shown as simpletons. Where are those marvelous people that Kutuzov talks about? (“Marvelous people... the beast will be wounded by the Russian might”). This is what has to be shown in the scene before the Borodino battle – at the moment when this spirit of anger in the people was revealed with great force.

...

One needs to emphasize the unity of all the Russian people in their hour of trial. I think that you need to develop the thought contained in Andrey’s words, “The success of the battle depends on the feeling which exists within me, within him, and within every soldier”. This phrase warrants special attention in purely musical terms, too. It is a wonderful theme, full of beauty and elevated emotion. From this [theme], you could perhaps build a broad vocal episode in Scene 10 – arias or monologues for Denisov and Kutuzov. This would be well justified dramaturgically, because the theme appears for the first time when Andrey says: ‘But I will tell you this – we will win this battle’. Given in the finale, it could be perceived as an image of victory, whose agents in the opera are Denisov and Kutuzov. Scene 8 needs decisive changes. Except for three wonderfully powerful moments – the choral exclamations of Muscovites, the lunatics’ music in  $\frac{3}{4}$  and the concluding song – nothing there is right at all.

If I were to define briefly what the content of Scene 8 should be, I think it should consist of the portrayal of three main feelings of the people: its grief, its wrath, and its resolve to fight for the Russian homeland.



The enemy is in Moscow! What feeling would this arouse in our listeners? Tolstoy talks about how the people felt insulted and had an overwhelming desire for revenge. What you have, however, is all these goings-on with the reading of the edict, and the play on the word «municipality», and needless talk about false banknotes. Imagine the cat-calls from your many musical «friends» when they're confronted by such a scene... They would certainly recall the scene with the cannon in *Semyon Kotko*, and if it was nothing short of demagogic to accuse you of wanting the present the people as fools there, then here (in the scene of the reading of the edict) it looks as if you've really done just that.

Tarle, in his wonderful book *Napoleon*, has this passage: Napoleon with his marshals stands near the Kremlin wall and looks at the fire of Moscow. The marshals approach him, saying, "Your majesty, the ground we stand on is on fire, the heavens are on fire, we are between walls of fire. Napoleon: "What a dreadful sight! They are setting it on fire themselves! Such resolution – such people – Scythians!"

This is what the music should be like, so that we can sense this earth of fire and sky of fire, this spectacle of Moscow ablaze, the resolute hearts of the people. We need music that would leave us stunned. And who other than you, could write such music, you, the composer of the Scythian Suite and the fire in *Semyon Kotko*! In contrast to the first scenes, everything needs to be composed on a grand scale now, with great melodic breadth and symphonic development.

The same in Scene 10. Instead of naïvely "tying up the loose ends" (the whole episode with Pierre), you should allow us to hear music of breadth and might, a truly national music, as in your score for *Alexander Nevsky*. You have to show the victorious people, and their joy.

... Here you have to present the full strength of heroes like Denisov, Vasilisa, and Kutuzov. ... In your Denisov, today's listener must see all of the many heroes of the Patriotic war against Hitlerism, who will be remembered through history as the greatest patriots and as courageous fighters for the happiness of the people.

...

Thus ... such scenes as 8 and 10 require wholesale revision, both dramatic and musical. Much has to be simply to be written afresh. There is a lot of work ahead of you. ...

Your opera is eagerly awaited. ... The Bolshoi is extremely interested in it, and in particular [the conductor] S.A. Samosud, who, having tasted some truly fine music, after conducting Shostakovich's Seventh Symphony, is burning to put on *War and Peace*. ...

*War and Peace* can become the opera that will glorify your name as a patriotic artist...

You are intending to begin working with Eisenstein on the film *Ivan the Terrible*. Wouldn't the projected Ivan hinder the already existing Kutuzov? My advice would be to finish *War and Peace* first, and only then start *Ivan the Terrible*. However, it is up to you.

I wish you successful completion of the opera. ...

Greetings,

S. Shlifshteyn, 10 May 1942

## APPENDIX 2: FIVE VERSIONS OF *WAR AND PEACE*

### Version 1: 11 scenes; completed April 1942 in vocal score

Overture

Scene 1	Otradnoye	Presenting Andrey and Natasha
Scene 2	At Bolkonsky's	Natasha is humiliated by her prospective father-in-law
Scene 3	At Hélène's	Anatole confesses his love for Natasha
Scene 4	At Dolokhov's	Anatole prepares to elope with Natasha



Scene 5	At Akhrosimova's	The elopement fails
Scene 6	At Pierre's	Pierre sends Anatole away, war is declared
Scene 7	Before the Battle of Borodino	The Russians mass their forces
Scene 8*	The Shevardino Redoubt	Napoleon during the battle of Borodino
Scene 9	Moscow	The French are in Moscow; devastation and fire
Scene 10	Mitishchi	Natasha and the dying Andrey
Scene 11	The Smolensk Road	The Russian victory

\*planned but not yet written

### Version 2: 11 scenes; completed November 1942 in vocal score, published in 1943

Main changes:

Choral Epigraph added (to be inserted either at the beginning, or before Scene 7)

Scene 7: A recitative passage replaced with Denisov's arioso; new episode inserted in which Smolensk refugees tell of French atrocities; the episode in which women bring food to the soldiers omitted; Andrey's remarks are expanded into a heroic aria

Scene 8: Kutuzov's theme inserted where the French discuss the Russians' courage

Scene 9: Two French songs and the reading of Napoleon's edict omitted; new episode with French looters; new episode with French actresses; new episode with Napoleon's procession, in which Napoleon expresses shock at the Russians' determination

Scene 11: new snowstorm music; Kutuzov's jocular remarks now given to the partisan Denisov; new aria for Denisov; new final chorus (apotheosis) written at a late stage (early 1943) under direct pressure from the authorities

The planned Bolshoi Theatre production of this version was thwarted: it proved too difficult to mount a production of this complexity in wartime conditions; Samosud's departure from the Bolshoi caused further difficulties; Stokovvki's offer of a New York Met production was declined by the composer at the behest of the Soviet authorities, who wished the first production to be Russian.

7 June 1945 – concert performance in Moscow under Samosud; for this performance, a new aria for Kutuzov was inserted into Scene 7

### Version 3: 13 Scenes in two parts, to be shown over two nights: 1946-48

Part I

Overture

Scene 1	Otradnoye	Presenting Andrey and Natasha
<b>Scene 2</b>	<b>The Ball</b>	<b>Natasha and Andrey dance their first waltz</b>
Scene 3	At Bolkonsky's	Natasha is humiliated by her prospective father-in-law
Scene 4	At Hélène's	Anatole confesses his love for Natasha
Scene 5	At Dolokhov's	Anatole prepares to elope with Natasha
Scene 6	At Akhrosimova's	The elopement fails
Scene 7	At Pierre's	Pierre sends Anatole away, war is declared
Part II		
Scene 8	Before the Battle of Borodino	The Russians mass their forces
Scene 9	The Shevardino Redoubt	Napoleon during the battle of Borodino
Scene 10	At Fili	Military council; Kutuzov decides not to defend Moscow
Scene 11	Moscow	The French are in Moscow; devastation and fire
Scene 12	Mitishchi	Natasha and the dying Andrey
Scene 13	The Smolensk Road	The Russian victory





Scene 2: entire new scene (early 1946)

Scenes 5, 8: fragments of Natasha's waltz inserted (early 1946)

Scene 9: new chorus of Russian soldiers inserted at the end

Scene 10: entire new scene

Scene 11: two French songs and the reading of Napoleon's edict reinstated; new chorus of the Russians ("Moscow will not bow to the enemy"); the riot of the Muscovites episode is substantially revised (early 1947); Kutuzov's theme inserted (early 1948)

Scene 12: Kutuzov's theme and Natasha's waltz inserted into Andrey's delirium (1947?)

Scene 13: a new apotheosis based on the Kutuzov theme

This expanded version was written for a planned production under Samosud at Leningrad's Maly Opera. 12 June 1946: premiere of Part I plus Scene 8; a run of 105 performances. Production of Part II planned for 1947. After a closed dress rehearsal in July 1947 the premiere was cancelled by the authorities. Scenes 9 and 11 were singled out for criticism on historical/ideological grounds.

**Version IV: as Version III but accompanied with instructions for abridgement to 10 scenes or fewer; designed for a single-night production; completed December 1948**

Overture: option to omit

Scenes 4, 5 omit either one of these scenes (but not both)

Scenes 6, 7 ending of 7 should follow directly after 6; remainder of 7 to be omitted

Epigraph: omit

Scene 8: to be shortened significantly

Scene 9 omit

Scene 10 shorten or omit

Scene 11 significantly shorten or omit

Scene 13 shorten

**Version V**

**Final version; completed 1952, premiere 1955 (after Prokofiev's death), published 1958**

A return to Version III, with the following changes:

Scene 1: Andrey's arioso expanded into an aria; new duet for Natasha and Sonya (1949)

Scene 10: new middle section for Kutuzov's Aria (1952)