

Serge Prokofiev: Peter And The Wolf (1936)

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) was one of Russia's greatest composers of the twentieth century. He began his career as a firebrand, writing spiky, in-your-face music. He spent many years in the West before succumbing to the lure of his homeland, and in 1929 he returned to live in the Soviet Union. The works he produced after taking up residence there generally have softer edges and more lyrical shapes than his earlier music, but his failure to embrace ideology in his work led to trouble with Communist Party operatives. Nonetheless, Prokofiev enjoyed immense esteem. He was the author of film music—for Sergei Eisenstein's *Lieutenant Kijé*, *Alexander Nevsky*, and *Ivan the Terrible*—as well as the ballets *Romeo and Juliet* and *Cinderella*, seven symphonies, five piano concertos—the list goes on. *Peter and the Wolf*, a perennial favorite, is from 1936.

We take it for granted that composers can write what they want, although if they wish to make a living from composing they must write what people will pay to hear. But the thing is, they can choose. Try to imagine what life was like for composers in the Soviet Union of the 1930s: roughly speaking, it was like this, "Follow the guidelines of our 'Socialist Realism', or you will be taken out and shot". But don't laugh - that's exactly what happened to some of them. Some strong-willed composers resisted this terrible attack on their artistic freedom - but not openly! Prokofiev found that he could get away with a lot by writing music for films and stage plays, where he could hide his "sins" behind the dramatic demands of the story-lines.

In 1936, Sergei Prokofiev was asked (though he couldn't say "no") and commissioned by Natalya Sats, the director of the Central Children's Theatre in Moscow, to write a new musical symphony for children. Sats and Prokofiev had become acquainted after he visited her theatre with his sons several times. The intent was to introduce children to the individual instruments of the orchestra. The idea was to "cultivate musical tastes in children from the first years of school". By "musical tastes", of course, they meant their sort of "musical tastes", and not the sort that would get you shot when you grew up! In the span of just four days, Prokofiev worked a miracle.

The first draft of the libretto was about a Young Pioneer (the Soviet version of a Boy Scout) called Peter who rights a wrong by challenging an adult. (This was a common theme in propaganda aimed at children in the Soviet Union at the time.) However, Prokofiev was dissatisfied with the rhyming text produced by Antonina Sakonskaya, a then popular children's author. So Prokofiev himself wrote a new version where Peter captures a wolf. As well as promoting desired Pioneer virtues such as vigilance, bravery and resourcefulness, the plot illustrates Soviet themes such as the stubbornness of the un-Bolshevik older generation (the grandfather) and the triumph of Man (Peter) taming Nature (the wolf). Prokofiev produced a version for the piano in under a week, finishing it on April 15. The orchestration was finished on April 24. The work debuted at a children's concert in the main hall of the Moscow Conservatory with the Moscow Philharmonic on 2 May 1936. However, Sats was ill and the substitute narrator inexperienced, and the performance failed to attract much attention. Later that month a much more successful performance with Sats narrating was given at the Moscow Pioneers Palace. The American premiere took place in March 1938, with Prokofiev himself conducting the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Symphony Hall, Boston with Richard Hale narrating. By that time Sats was serving a sentence in the gulag, where she was sent after her lover Marshal Mikhail Tukhachevsky was shot in June 1937.

Prokofiev produced detailed performance notes in both English and Russian for *Peter and the Wolf*. According to the English version:

“Each character of this tale is represented by a corresponding instrument in the orchestra: the bird by a flute, the duck by an oboe, the cat by a clarinet playing staccato in a low register, the grandfather by a bassoon, the wolf by three horns, Peter by the string quartet, the shooting of the hunters by the kettle drums and bass drum. Before an orchestral performance it is desirable to show these instruments to the children and to play on them the corresponding leitmotifs. Thereby, the children learn to distinguish the sonorities of the instruments during the performance of this tale.” But, like Peter, Sergei Prokofiev was a very bad boy: he tucked away inside the music many naughty things. Luckily, none of his “masters” noticed, and lots of children eventually learnt not only about Peter’s hair-raising adventure with the Wolf, but also (without even being aware of it), a fair bit about “artistic freedom”. Knowing this I wonder, is it always bad to be naughty?

For this evening’s concert performance for adults, even though you’re grown-up, you’ll have lots of fun listening to the story. You can also have lots of fun listening to how Prokofiev pulls the strings of his musical “characters”. For starters, what do you make of the “characters” themselves? The flute becomes a really cool “little bird”. The oboe and its tune bring to mind a duck called Gemima rather than Donald, the slinky black clarinet just oozes “cat”, and the gruff bassoon grumbles “grandad” to a “T”. But, while you revel in the spectacular noise of the hunters’ rifles, you just might wonder which of them is toting what sounds like a six-inch naval cannon, and why!

Then there’s Peter himself, whose introduction on the strings seems to paint a picture of sweetness and light: how many parents have a lad like this (and be ruthlessly honest with yourselves!)? But then, how many of them will look at you as if butter wouldn’t melt in their mouths, doe eyes saying, “Would I do such a thing?” - and all the time hoping that you don’t spot the catapult hidden behind their backs? Well, listen to what Prokofiev does with Peter’s tune: even at the outset there’s a lurch in the harmony that would make any respectable parent - or grandparent - deeply suspicious! Peter, a Young Pioneer, lives at his grandfather's home in a forest clearing. One day, Peter goes out into the clearing, leaving the garden gate open, and the duck that lives in the yard takes the opportunity to go swimming in a pond nearby. The duck starts arguing with a little bird ("What kind of bird are you if you can't fly?" – "What kind of bird are you if you can't swim?"). Peter's pet cat stalks them quietly, and the bird—warned by Peter—flies to safety in a tall tree while the duck swims to safety in the middle of the pond.

Peter's grandfather scolds him for being outside in the meadow alone ("Suppose a wolf came out of the forest?"), and, when he defies him, saying: "Boys like me are not afraid of wolves", his grandfather takes him back into the house and locks the gate. Soon afterwards "a big, grey wolf" does indeed come out of the forest. The cat quickly climbs into a tree, but the duck, who has jumped out of the pond, is chased, overtaken, and swallowed by the wolf.

Peter fetches a rope and climbs over the garden wall into the tree. He asks the bird to fly around the wolf's head to distract him, while he lowers a noose and catches the wolf by his tail. The wolf struggles to get free, but Peter ties the rope to the tree and the noose only gets tighter.

Some hunters, who have been tracking the wolf, come out of the forest ready to shoot, but Peter gets them to help him take the wolf to a zoo in a victory parade (the piece was first performed for an audience of Young Pioneers during May Day celebrations) that includes himself, the bird, the hunters leading the wolf, the cat, and grumpy grumbling Grandfather ("What if Peter hadn't caught the wolf? What then?")

In the story's ending, the listener is told: "If you listen very carefully, you'll hear the duck quacking inside the wolf's belly, because the wolf in his hurry had swallowed her alive."

The work has been recorded many times, and the careful pairing of celebrity narrators and conductors has made for truly historic collaborations. Some of the most notable include Basil Rathbone & Leopold Stokowski (1941), Eleanor Roosevelt & Serge Koussevitzky (1950), Peter Ustinov & Herbert von Karajan (1956), Captain Kangaroo & Leopold Stokowski (1960), Leonard Bernstein in both roles (1960), Mia Farrow & André Previn (1977), David Bowie & Eugene Ormandy (#136 on the Pop music charts in 1978), Itzhak Perlman & Zubin Mehta (1986), Sting & Claudio Abbado (1994), Mikhail Gorbachev, Bill Clinton & Kent Nagano (2003) and Jacqueline du Prè & Daniel Barenboim (2008).

Perhaps the most interesting collaboration to American audiences is the one between Disney and Prokofiev. While touring the West in 1938, Prokofiev visited Los Angeles and met Walt Disney. Prokofiev performed the piano version of Peter and the Wolf for "le papa de Mickey Mouse", as Prokofiev described him in a letter to his sons. Disney was impressed, and considered adding an animated version of Peter and the Wolf to Fantasia, which was to be released in 1940. Due to World War II, these plans fell through, and it was not until 1946 that Disney released his adaptation (an animated short) of Peter and the Wolf narrated by Sterling Holloway. It is not known if Prokofiev, by that point behind the Iron Curtain, was aware of this. It was released theatrically as a segment of Make Mine Music, then reissued the next year, accompanying a reissue of Fantasia (as a short subject before the film), then separately on home video in the 1990s. This version makes several changes to the original story. For example:

During the character introduction, the pets are given names: "Sasha" the bird, "Sonia" the duck, and "Ivan" the cat. As the cartoon begins, Peter and his friends already know there is a wolf nearby and are preparing to catch him. The hunters get names in a later part of the story: "Misha", "Yasha", and "Vladimir". Peter daydreams of hunting and catching the wolf, and for that purpose exits the garden carrying a wooden pop gun. At the end, in a reversal of the original (and to make the story more child-friendly), the narrator reveals that the duck Sonia has not been eaten by the wolf. Earlier in the film, the wolf is shown chasing Sonia, who hides in an old tree's hollow trunk. The wolf attacks out of view and returns in view with some of her feathers in his mouth, licking his jaws. Peter, Ivan, and Sasha assume Sonia has been eaten. After the wolf has been caught, Sasha is shown mourning Sonia. She comes out of the tree trunk at that point, and they are happily reunited. In 1957, for one of his television programs, Disney recalled how Prokofiev himself visited the Disney studio, eventually inspiring the making of this animated version. Disney used pianist Ingolf Dahl, who resembled Prokofiev, to re-create how the composer sat at a piano and played the themes from the score.

--notes adapted from Internet sources by Stephen Larmore