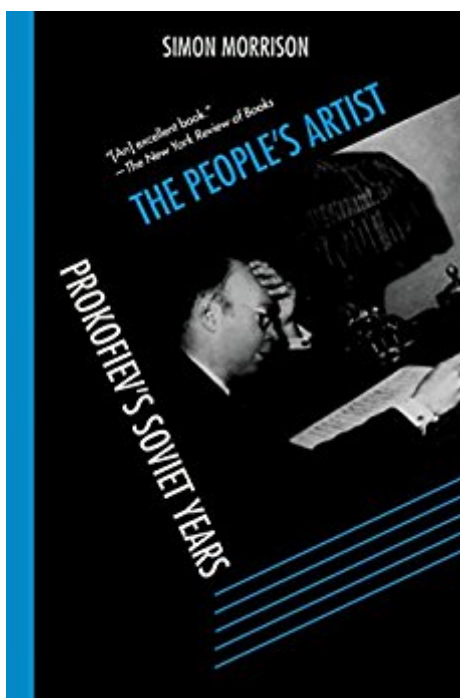


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The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years



Synopsis

Sergey Prokofiev was one of the twentieth century's greatest composers--and one of its greatest mysteries. Until now. In *The People's Artist*, Simon Morrison draws on groundbreaking research to illuminate the life of this major composer, deftly analyzing Prokofiev's music in light of new archival discoveries. Indeed, Morrison was the first scholar to gain access to the composer's sealed files in the Russian State Archives, where he uncovered a wealth of previously unknown scores, writings, correspondence, and unopened journals and diaries. The story he found in these documents is one of lofty hopes and disillusionment, of personal and creative upheavals. Morrison shows that Prokofiev seemed to thrive on uncertainty during his Paris years, stashing scores in suitcases, and ultimately stunning his fellow émigrés by returning to Stalin's Russia. At first, Stalin's regime treated him as a celebrity, but Morrison details how the bureaucratic machine ground him down with corrections and censorship (forcing rewrites of such major works as *Romeo and Juliet*), until it finally censured him in 1948, ending his career and breaking his health.

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Customer Reviews

The subject matter was a bit constricted in range. It would be better if one were to read a more general biography first-like Jaffe.

Awesome bio! Morrison knows this s***!

Our college students can't quite grasp the misery of living under Stalin's thumb, and the meticulous reporting on the life of this famous composer after his move to the Soviet Union (not his return home, because he left while it was still Tsarist Russia) is excellent. For researchers and reflective readers only.

A splendid biography. It answers many questions about P., e.g. his attachment to Christian Science as part of his philosophy.

It's a good reference. It's insightful, quality research. Of course there are two sides to the story. Some scholars view Prokofiev as apolitical. This book clearly paints him as a very political composer. The real problem in researching this composer is in sifting out the evidence that is coerced due to living under a repressive regime thus exposing his actual desires and intent. How does one decide what is propaganda and what is sincere? Having read both views, I tend to agree with this view. The need for simplicity was something he was taught to pursue from his childhood and it coincided nicely with the ideology of Soviet Realism and music for the common man. I believe he truly wanted to please the people and the government he served, but the shifting, chaotic nature of the political and ideological landscape in the Stalin years made it a nearly impossible task.

It is obviously always very welcome when a major monograph is published about a peculiar artist such as Sergei Prokofiev. I read Harlow Robinson's "Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography" a long ago and the image I came away with was of a tremendously gifted but temperamental, opportunistic and egocentric composer. One of the most mystifying episodes in Prokofiev's life is his move back to the Soviet Union, early in 1936, almost at the nadir of Stalinist repression. The introductory chapter in Morrison's book illuminate the logic of this surprising move. Basically, Prokofiev was outfoxed by the Soviet apparatchiks. When he was abroad, before his move, he was promised considerable perks and artistic freedoms. A steady stream of Soviet commissions led 1935 to be one of the most lucrative years of his career. And Prokofiev was pretty sure he could keep his options open: when the Soviet adventure would prove to be a disappointment, he and his family could always return to

the West. Very soon it was clear that the Soviet cultural establishment had another scenario in mind. In the first few years, Prokofiev and his wife Lina were allowed to travel abroad with their children, however, remaining as 'hostages' in Moscow. Already in 1938 Prokofiev did his very last tour outside of the Soviet Union. Henceforth, he would remain in the Soviet Union. That being said, Sergei Prokofiev did produce some (maybe even most) of his timeless works during the roughly 25-year long Soviet chapter in his life. So something in that precarious setting must have connected with his creative impulse. The merits of Morrison's study are multiple. It provides us with a more balanced picture of Prokofiev's personality to start with. Sergei Sergeyevich may have been vain and competitive, he was also a tremendously hardworking man who was not insensitive to the plight of his relatives and colleagues. His separation from Lina and his children and his relationship with Mira Mendelsohn is cast in a somewhat more favorable light than is sometimes the case. And we get a much better view on Prokofiev's working methods, particularly as far as the dramatic work is concerned. Morrison provides us with very detailed discussions of Prokofiev's work on his operatic and cinematographic output, illuminating the nature of his dramatic instinct, his compositional strategies, his relationship with the texts and demands of directors, and his reaction to the variegated pressures of Soviet cultural censorship. All of this is certainly captivating material and Morrison's effort in garnering it in this sweeping overview of Prokofiev's Soviet career is certainly commendable. That being said, I also feel the study has a number of definite weaknesses. As already indicated, the focus is very much on the dramatic work (the operas, ballets, incidental music, film scores and cantatas). The instrumental, chamber and symphonic music is discussed much more cursorily. And that is deplorable as his most timeless contributions are likely not in opera and film, despite Prokofiev's own insistence to seeing himself as essentially as a dramatic composer. For example, whilst Morrison qualifies the three 'War Sonatas' as more radical (and successful) than anything else in Prokofiev's mature oeuvre, he gives them short shrift. The Sixth Sonata is discussed on a mere two pages, the Seventh only gets a fraction of a page and the monumental Eighth, certainly one of Prokofiev's most impressive compositions, is only fleetingly mentioned. In contrast, the incidental music Prokofiev wrote for an aborted production of Pushkin's 'Boris Godunov', directed by the tragically murdered Vsevolod Meyerhold, is discussed over a full 16 pages (understable, maybe, given that in 2007 the author oversaw a world-premiere staging of Pushkin's drama, featuring Prokofiev's incidental music and Meyerhold's directorial concepts.) Whatever discussion of instrumental works there is, is not convincing to boot. Morrison doesn't seem to be with his heart in it, haphazardly relying on secondary sources and continual references to a more spiritual side in Prokofiev's psychological layout (he was an ardent follower of

the Christian Science teachings). For example, once more in relationship to the War Sonatas, what are we to make of an assertion such as: "The music is abstract insofar as it avoids external references, but for the composer, abstraction bore programmatic, spiritualistic associations. One could fancifully argue that the three sonatas transcend their own structural and syntactical constraints, revealing those constraints to be the false postulates of false reasoning". Similarly, the all too short discussion of the monumental Sixth Symphony doesn't even mention, let alone clarify the Wagnerian overtones of the central Largo (Parsifal's 'Spear' motif) and concludes with the enigmatic assessment that the symphony 'embraces much of the surface rhetoric of a socialist realist narrative but little of its cohesiveness.' Another element that remains curiously underdeveloped in the book is Prokofiev's relationship with some of his most influential colleagues. Myaskovsky was one of Prokofiev's most trusted friends but he appears only as a kind of narrator citing snippets from his diaries. The nature of the relationship between these two composers remains in the dark. What Prokofiev thought about Myaskovsky's work we don't know. Similarly with Shostakovich who makes ghostly appearances here and there in the book - spending a night chatting with Prokofiev and Mira during a train journey to Moscow, or putting his dacha to Prokofiev's disposal. These courtesies did not keep Prokofiev from critiquing Shostakovich's work in public. But what did this really mean? Morrison surmises that Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony emerged as a reaction to Shostakovich's Fifth, but it's a mere hypothesis that is not corroborated by facts. When Shostakovich's Fifth Symphony was performed in 1936, it must have come as a bolt from the blue, given the general mediocrity of Soviet classical music at that time, the iron grip of Soviet censorship on cultural production and also Prokofiev's own struggle to adjust to the new regime. Yet, at that point, we learn nothing about Prokofiev's reaction to this work. Finally, Simon Morrison is not a great stylist. The prose is serviceable, but no more than that. The structure of the book is sometimes confusing too. I have a suspicion that Morrison started from a collection of papers (or a PhD) on various dramatic works which he subsequently meshed with biographic material. This can explain why the structure of the book is sometimes so heavily tilted towards those long excursions whilst the chronology jumps back and forth. However, I gladly admit that the narration improves in the final quarter of the book. The story of Prokofiev's life through the end of the war and the damaging Zhdanov resolution of 1948 is very well told. So rather than a general, all-encompassing overview of Prokofiev's Soviet years, I would consider this book at heart more an academic dissertation on the mature Prokofiev's dramatic output. As a result of reading Morrison's book we do get a more balanced and three dimensional view on Prokofiev's complex personality, although many questions remain. The foundational mystery - namely how Prokofiev was able to find artistic

nourishment in this brutally inhuman society - remains a riddle. Maybe Prokofiev's belief in Christian Science theory has something to do with it, but it is not the whole story. That being said, I am still happy to have access to this abundant material. However, the book as a whole is too unbalanced to count as the final study of Prokofiev's Soviet years.

THE PEOPLE'S ARTIST is the single most important work to date on the great composer emphasizing the Soviet era. Morrison writes as if he were telling the story in the first person, divulging the most detailed scholarship culled from primary sources hitherto unknown to the West. The culture of the Soviet era is revealed, solving many mysteries that show his true motives for decisions both personal and professional. Most notably, Prokofiev's intentions in choosing to stay in the Soviet Union are finally clearly presented. No stone is unturned. The fascinating process of composing many works at the same time, of producing the ballets and working with the epic filmmaker Sergey Eisenstein - yet at all times anticipating the provincial demands of Stalin's hierarchy - are brought to vivid focus. This book belongs in any library, and especially to those readers interested in the enigmatic composer and the Soviet era. Terry King

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