Prokofiev’s Style and Important Works

Style

The composer described his style elements as being:

1. Classical, imitating the style of the 18th Century in a neo-classic framework; influenced greatly by Beethoven.
2. A search for innovation. “The cardinal virtue (or, if you like, vice) of my life has always been the search for originality. I hate imitation. I hate hackneyed methods. I do not want to wear anyone else's mask. I want always to be myself."
3. Characterized by an element of the toccata, or the motor element.
4. Lyrical (an element that developed, and became more pronounced in the latter works)
5. **Filled with "Scherzo-ness" or the three words giving its gradations: jest, laughter, mockery.**

Melody

Wide leaps and unexpected turns of phrases; fair amount of folk material; lyricism in later works.

Rhythm

Athletic, frequently march like, rhythms. Prokofiev's works are characterized by almost "incessant" rhythmic drive, often ostinato. In

evidence are many folk rhythms, dance rhythms, extended rhythmic repetitions.

Harmony

Prokofiev is essentially diatonic, though pungently dissonant at times. He was fond of unexpected changes of keys. He showed a special fondness for C Major. Occasionally, he wrote atonal passages, but only to underscore and contrast with the tonal passages. Some modality was used.

Orchestration

Prokofiev was a brilliant, typically Russian orchestrator. Many works emphasize an active percussion section. Characteristic is his use of solo scoring in the orchestral texture, especially for various strings. Bass lines are distinctive; he was fond of using both the bass clarinet and the contra-bassoon. Lines are written with unusual clarity. Strings were frequently written in octaves or double octaves. **A trademark trait is his use of trumpet in the low register, frequently in staccato passages.**

Forms

Prokofiev was a traditionalist in form, used the large, classical forms. He especially loved the sonata form. He used motives and motific development procedures. He was also a skilled and prolific contrapuntalist.

Important Works

Orchestral

Scythian Suite, Op. 20 (1915)
This was Prokofiev's first attempt at large orchestra writing. It was a Diaghilev Ballet commission.

Lt Kijé, op. 60 (1934) The story is a satire on bureaucracy and authoritarianism: The story satirizes bureaucracy under Emperor Paul I of Russia. A clerical error invents a fictional officer, Lieutenant Kijé, who is then "promoted," punished, married, and eventually declared dead — all without ever existing. Originally composed as a film score.

Peter and the Wolf **(1936)** A beloved symphonic tale for children, where each character is vividly portrayed by an instrument: strings as Peter, clarinet as the cat, bassoon as grandfather, and so on.

Romeo and Juliet (Op 64), Suite 1 (Op 64b) and Suite 2 (Op 64c) (1936)

Violin Concerto #1 in D Major, op. 19 (1917)

Violin Concerto #2 in G Minor, op. 63 (1935)

Cello Concerto

Piano Concertos

- No. 1 in D-flat major, Op. 10 (1911)
    - In 1914, Prokofiev was a student at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. He entered the prestigious Anton Rubinstein Prize competition, awarded to the best pianist of the graduating class. Instead of playing a standard concerto by Beethoven, Liszt, or Tchaikovsky (as was expected), Prokofiev boldly chose to perform his own First Piano Concerto.
    - The jury was astonished — some admired his audacity, others were scandalized by the modern, dissonant style.
    - Prokofiev won the prize, making him the only student in Conservatory history to do so with his own composition.
- No. 2 in G minor, Op. 16 (original 1913; revised 1923)

- No. 3 in C major, Op. 26 (recording of Prokofiev with the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Piero Coppola in June 1932)
- No. 4 in B-flat major, Op. 53 (for the left hand, commissioned by Paul Wittgenstein) (1931)
- No. 5 in G major, Op. 55 (1932)

Symphonies

1st, 5th, and 7th are most notable.

- **Symphony No. 1 in D major, Op. 25 ("Classical") (1917) Prokofiev's witty homage to Haydn, written during World War I**
- Symphony No. 2 in D minor, Op. 40 (1925) Harsh, modernist reflection of Prokofiev's Paris years
- Symphony No. 3 in C minor, Op. 44 (1928) Reworks material from opera *The Fiery Angel*.
- Symphony No. 4 in C major, Op. 47 (original version, 1930); revised version released as Op. 112 in 1947
- Symphony No. 5 in B-flat major, Op. 100 (1944)
    - Often considered his greatest
    - Composed during WWII. At the premiere at the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory (13 Jan 1945), as Prokofiev raised his baton, artillery fire celebrating the Red Army's advance against Nazi forces thundered outside.
- Symphony No. 6 in E-flat minor, Op. 111 (1947) Dark; reflects postwar devastation
- Symphony No. 7 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131 (1952)

- Commissioned by the Children's Division of Soviet State Radio. For that reason, Prokofiev used a simple, clear musical language. This gave the work a childlike innocence and directness, quite different from the darker, more complex Sixth Symphony that had been condemned by Stalin's cultural authorities.
- There are two endings — one for politics, one for art. Prokofiev originally ended the symphony quietly and wistfully, reflecting his declining health and sense of farewell. However, he was persuaded to add a bright, optimistic coda to win the Stalin Prize (worth 100,000 rubles). He later told friends that the original subdued ending was the true one, and many modern performances restore it.
- Posthumous recognition. Though Prokofiev died in 1953, the Seventh Symphony was awarded the Lenin Prize in 1957, cementing its place in the Soviet canon. Today, it is often seen as a gentle, nostalgic farewell, contrasting with the grandeur of the Fifth and the severity of the Sixth.

Operas

Love for Three Oranges (suite made in 1919)

War and Peace (1941-42; revised much later)

The Duenna (1940)

The Flaming Angel (1927)

Chamber Works

Sextet in G Minor, op. 34, "Overture on Jewish Themes" (1919) (clarinet, string quartet, and piano)

String Quartet #1 B Minor, op. 50 (1930)

String Quartet #2 F Major, op. 92 (1942)

Sonata for Violin and Piano #1 F Minor, op. 80 (1938-46)

Sonata for Violin and Piano #2 D Major, op. 94 (1943), originally for flute

Sonata for Cello and Piano, Op. 119 (1949)