SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Born April 23, 1891 in Sontzovka, Russia; died March 5, 1953 in Moscow.

Symphony No. 5, Opus 100 (1944)

PREMIERE OF WORK: Moscow, January 13, 1945
Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory
USSR State Symphony Orchestra
Sergei Prokofiev, conductor
APPROXIMATE DURATION: 46 minutes
INSTRUMENTATION: piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, English horn, E-flat clarinet, two clarinets, bass clarinet, two bassoons, contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, piano, harp and strings

"In the Fifth Symphony I wanted to sing the praises of the free and happy man — his strength, his generosity and the purity of his soul. I cannot say I chose this theme; it was born in me and had to express itself." The "man" that Prokofiev invoked in this description of the philosophy embodied in this great Symphony could well have been the composer himself. The work was written in the summer of 1944, one of the happiest times he knew. His home life following marriage to his second wife four years earlier was contented and fulfilling; he was the most famous and often-performed of all Soviet composers; and Russia was winning the war. In fact, the success of the premiere of this work was buoyed by the announcement immediately before the concert that the Russian army had just scored a resounding victory on the River Vistula. The composer's mind was reflected in the fluency and emotional depth of his music.

Prokofiev never hinted that there was a program underlying the Fifth Symphony except to say that "it is a symphony about the spirit of man." During the difficult years of World War II, Soviet music, according to Boris Schwartz, "was meant to console and uplift, to encourage and exhort; nothing else mattered." Though some, like Martin Bookspan, find "ominous threats of brutal warfare" lurking beneath the surface of Prokofiev's music, there is really nothing here to match such symphonies born of the violence of war as Shostakovich's Seventh and Vaughan Williams' Fourth. Rather it is a work that reflects the composer's philosophy after he returned to Russia in the 1930s from many years of living in western Europe and America. In his 1946 autobiographical sketch, he wrote, "It is the duty of the composer, like the poet, the sculptor or the painter, to serve his fellow men, to beautify human life and point the way to a radiant future. Such is the immutable code of art as I see it."

The Symphony's opening movement is a large sonata form in moderate tempo that begins without introduction. The wide-ranging main theme is presented simply by flute and bassoon before being taken up by the strings; flute and oboe sing the lyrical second theme. Two brief motives close the exposition. One, characterized by its dotted rhythms, arrives on the crest of the movement's first climax; the other is an angular, skittish fragment tossed off by high woodwinds, violins and cellos. The development gives prominence in its first portion to the opening theme and the skittish motive from the end of the exposition; it later focuses on the second theme and the arch-shaped complementary melody. The recapitulation is heralded by the stentorian sounds of the brass choir announcing the main theme.

The second-movement scherzo is one of those pieces that Prokofiev would have classified as "motoric": an incessant two-note rhythmic motive drives the music forward through its entire first section. The movement's central section is framed by a bold, strutting phrase from the woodwinds adorned with the piquant "wrong notes" that spice so much of Prokofiev's quick music.

The brooding third movement is in a large three-part design. The outer sections are supported by the deliberate rhythmic tread of the low instruments used as underpinning for a plaintive melody initiated by the clarinets. A sweeping theme begun by the tuba serves as the basis for the middle section.

The finale opens with a short introduction comprising two gestures based on the main theme of the first movement: a short woodwind phrase answered by the strings, and a chorale for cellos. The main body of the movement is a sonata-rondo structure propelled by an insistent rhythmic motive. The movement accumulates a large amount of thematic material as it progresses, though it is the solo clarinet playing the main theme which begins each of the important structural sections of the form. A furious, energetic coda ignites several of the movement's themes into a grand closing blaze of orchestral color.

— Dr. Richard E. Rodda