

## PROKOFIEV, THE PRODIGAL SON

JUST as in his ballet, *The Prodigal Son*, Prokofiev finally saw the foolishness, waste and lack of creative inspiration that marked his years abroad away from the family and so returned home — to a fuller life and restored powers. Or so Israel Nestyev would have us believe, if I correctly interpret *Sergei Prokofiev, His Musical Life* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1946).

Much of what Nestyev says about Prokofiev the composer, is quite clearly perceived. The style throughout the years is well analyzed, new influences are aptly caught at the moment of their entrance, the dominant role of the lyrical is traced from the beginning, and Prokofiev's formal processes are given a clear exposition. The material on the theatre works is often fresh or unfamiliar, and the point that the theatre is a prime motivation of Prokofiev's whole development is well supported. In fact Nestyev even makes out quite a good case for a regenerated composer under the Soviet flag. It is generally conceded that Prokofiev's middle period works are among his least satisfactory. But Nestyev even sees *The Prodigal Son* as an indication of a renaissance for which Soviet Russia is somehow responsible, although the work was composed before his homecoming.

Throughout the book there is the tendency to interpret facts according to the precise dates of the Revolution. Thus the *Classical Symphony* reveals a "new tranquillity and clarity" — supposedly in line with the conquering philosophy of a political event which took place when Prokofiev was away in the southern part of his country — and at the same time the seeds of a

decay which was to set in later abroad. Once back home again, Prokofiev is only gradually accepted, gently chided for his lapses along the way in filling the people's needs. Of course finally he makes the grade. An excerpt from the composer's *Autobiography* even supports the author, who excuses Prokofiev's fifteen-year exile on the grounds that he was too preoccupied with the writing of music to understand what was going on around him.

This version of Prokofiev's life, and its parallel coloration of the purely musical facts could be swallowed more readily were it not for the perpetual and unnecessary buffetings of others. Diaghilev becomes a kind of evil master who lures the young man away from his rightful place, Stravinsky is dispensed with first as barbaric, later as a neo-classicist, and much else is easily tagged as sophisticated, decadent, formalistic. Even Prokofiev's own splendid barbaric pages in the *Scythian Suite* were "actually foreign to his nature and inner conviction."

A complete list of Prokofiev's work to date and a scholarly index complete the book. The introduction is a strange if interesting prose writing of Eisenstein. This gives us the same juggling of facts: Because of his creative exactness and dependability in matters of time, Prokofiev is essentially a "man of the screen." Yet this distorted little sketch somehow evokes the Prokofiev personality more convincingly than Nestyev's full-length picture, which has a value only where the technical comments on music are divorced from hazy philosophy.

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