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Prokofiev: A Biography. From Russia to the West 1891-1935
(review)

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(published in 1969, his 90th year), in which he lampooned Grainger's efforts to purge Mediterranean influences from the English language, provides a helpful comparison with extracts from previous chapters. Scott was one of many who was asked by Grainger to supply memorabilia for the Melbourne museum. He eventually, and somewhat reluctantly, supplied an old-fashioned suit to clothe an effigy, while others agreed to have their eyes photographed (a manifestation of Grainger's racially based belief that all the best composers had blue eyes!); a visit to William Walton's residence is extracted from Susana Walton's biography of her husband. (Incidentally, the photograph on p. 196, listed as being the eyes of Vaughan Williams, who was certainly photographed by Grainger, are in fact those of Walton.) Grainger's 'Free Music', an idea that had pre-occupied the composer for decades, more fully engaged him during the post-war period. Part of a radio interview (for 3LO Melbourne in 1976) with Burnett Cross who, as a scientist, collaborated with Grainger in order to construct the machines necessary to realize Grainger's broader spectrum of pitches, gives an informative description of the 'Reed-box Tone-tool' (now preserved in the Grainger Museum). This project never reached fruition, and it is evident from an extract from the unpublished paper 'The Grainger Museum—The First Phase' (1966) by Richard Hindle Fowler that Grainger's vision of his museum in Melbourne was encountering paralysing problems. The tasks of organizing vast amounts of material and concerning upkeep of the building were huge, not least because, during the Second World War, Grainger insisted that a quantity of the most important materials had to be moved inland in order to avoid potential destruction (which, with air raids on Australia, had become a distinct possibility). Grainger did, after an absence of eighteen years, visit the museum in 1956, though Fowler's account clearly evidences Grainger's sense of guilt at his lack of planning. By this time Grainger's health was already failing rapidly as he struggled with the effects of prostate cancer. A full explanation of his decline is given (in a private letter to John Bird in 1975) by Nygaard, who oversaw all Grainger's medical care, and the core details of the nine-page autopsy (from White Plains) are provided as corroboration.

As a conclusion to this volume, the editors have included three extracts from Grainger's own writings, two of them from unpublished sources. It is daunting to ponder the sheer extent of Grainger's autobiographical reflec-

tions, and the obsessive detail of his *The Life of My Mother and Her Son*, which he envisaged as a book, is briefly illustrated by a short example. A further extract, taken from his unpublished essay 'The Love-life of Helen and Paris', written in 1927-8 during his courtship with Ella Ström, encapsulates his racial fixations and social anarchy, couched in his own 'purified' brand of English:

I have found my jewel, I have picked my crown. Do not folk envy us as we stand or walk; 2 perfect Nordics, 2 fellow artists, 2 fellow outlaws, 2 sex-lawless ones, equally strong, equally gay, equally wild, equally finely bred; something about us apart and aloof from the careful world of public-opinion-fearing, money-hungry, respectability-mongering, middle-class, lower-race bastards that ring us round? All my life I have dreamt, thought and talked of the ideal woman—she is so nearly a man, yet so utterly a woman; here she is, take stock of her! (p. 205)

In 1951, Grainger hoped to draw together all his memories and musings into a more definitive autobiography called 'My Wretched Tone-life'. All that remains, however, are three pages of introduction which are given here as an example of how he appeared to have descended into a dark, introspective world of melancholy, an impression that flies in the face of most of those who knew him from his shock of blond hair, his boundless energy, athleticism, good nature, and extraordinary generosity.

Portrait of Percy Grainger is an entertaining and informative anthology that will undoubtedly be useful for scholars, Grainger enthusiasts, and those new to this most maverick of Australians. My hope, however, is that scholarship will now turn to Grainger's most valuable legacy, his music, which, given its immense variety and scope, has still to be properly and thoroughly appraised for its sheer inventiveness and originality.

JEREMY DIBBLE

Prokofiev: A Biography. From Russia to the West 1891–1935. By David Nice. pp. xvi + 390. (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2003, £25. ISBN 0-300-09914-2.)

The division of Prokofiev's life and work into Western and Russian periods has been problematic in several ways. Most obviously, in terms of the composer's own personal life—not to mention those of his first wife Carolina Codina and their two sons Sviatoslav and Oleg—the family's permanent return to Soviet Russia in 1936 took them into a nightmarish world they could never have imagined. In terms of his career, Prokofiev was caught between the

two towering figures of Stravinsky in the West and Shostakovich in Soviet Russia. Less radical than Stravinsky and remaining aloof from the controversy—and mythology—around Shostakovich, Prokofiev never achieved the iconic status of his two great contemporaries. Victor Seroff, writing at the height of the Cold War, was unequivocal about the disastrous personal and professional results of his friend's return (see his *Sergei Prokofiev: A Soviet Tragedy* (London, 1969)). Predictably enough, his book was instantly discredited in the Soviet Union by Prokofiev's official Soviet biographer Israel Nestyev. But his view that Prokofiev's return was a terrible mistake has been challenged more recently too, this time from an outstanding champion of Prokofiev's music, the conductor Valery Gergiev. Gergiev's argument—that had Prokofiev remained in the West, we would have been deprived of his greatest music (cited in Harlow Robinson, *Sergei Prokofiev*, rev. edn. (Boston, 2002), p. xi)—is still every bit as controversial as Seroff's. Whereas few would claim that Prokofiev ceased to compose decent music after his return to the Soviet Union, there is no doubt that he did not expect life there to turn out quite so bleakly. Trips abroad were forbidden, his career was severely damaged during the *Zhdanovshchina* of 1948, and, cruellest of all, Carolina was arrested and sent to the Gulag. Moreover, it is hardly reasonable to assume that, if Prokofiev had remained in the West, he would not have written music as profound or as lasting as that which he wrote after his return to the USSR.

It is precisely these tangled politics of reception that have been responsible for Prokofiev's unusual position in Anglo-American studies. On the one hand, his years in the West made him a household name in the way that no other Soviet composer ever was. His association with Stravinsky (he remained the only Soviet composer for whom Stravinsky professed any admiration), Diaghilev, and Les Six, not to mention his international career as a pianist, put him in the front rank of young modernists in 1920s Paris. On the other hand, as an émigré Russian modernist he was eclipsed by Stravinsky; the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* took place only weeks before the 22-year-old Prokofiev first visited Paris. And even back in Russia, where he might safely have counted on being top dog at last, Prokofiev's star was quickly outshone by Shostakovich's after the success of his Fifth Symphony in 1937, and most categorically after the iconic status accorded the 'Lenin-grad' Symphony in 1942. What is more, those same works of Stravinsky and Shostakovich

continue to overshadow Prokofiev's; apart from his own Fifth, his Soviet-period symphonies are heard far less often than Shostakovich's. A cynical observer might be forgiven for suspecting that, if only Solomon Volkov had come to Prokofiev's rescue and made him a bit more interesting, we might hear quite a bit more of those semi-neglected masterpieces. But it is not just the post-1936 Prokofiev who is in need of championing; the *enfant terrible* image that dogged his Soviet career perversely lingers in the West as well, and as a result performances of his Second, Third, and Fourth Symphonies are few and far between. In this respect among many others, David Nice's intelligent, if brief, engagement with such magnificent and underrated works as the Second Symphony—still frequently dismissed as merely noisy—is long overdue.

Nice's major achievement is to have produced an English-language study that will—once the second volume is published—safely displace Nestyev's old Soviet biography (*Prokofiev*, trans. Florence Jonas (Stanford, 1961)) for detailed discussion not only of Prokofiev's life but of his musical development. Not only has he carried out a thorough perusal of English-language reviews not found in any other Prokofiev biography, but he has researched early Russian sources as well, quoting from the pre-Soviet journals *Rech* and *Slovo*, among others. In his discussion of the music, too, Nice's study largely supersedes Nestyev's. Although both show the evolution of Prokofiev's style, making frequent cross-references and comparisons, Nice's discussion is free from the anti-Western, anti-modern prejudices that Prokofiev tried in vain to eliminate from Nestyev's account (his first study of Prokofiev's life and work was published in 1946, and Prokofiev made extensive corrections to the manuscript, most of which Nestyev seems to have ignored).

Nice is not the only Western researcher to have combed the Russian State Archives of Literature and Art or the Glinka State Museum (Harlow Robinson did that in the 1970s and 1980s), but he is the only scholar to have made a thorough investigation of the Sergei Prokofiev Archive, established by Carolina Prokofiev and housed at Goldsmiths College, London. Though in the main he draws on the archive mostly in the second half of the study (covering the period 1919–35), his research throws new light on a number of still thorny issues. The first of these concerns Prokofiev's understanding of the political situation in Soviet Russia. While Seroff believed Prokofiev's decision to return to Russia was

naive, quoting him as declaring 'as for politics, they don't concern me' (*Sergei Prokofiev*, 194), Nice implies that Prokofiev's overriding concern was for his career as he came to feel frustrated both by his status in the West and by the financial constraints of concert life there. Nice's Prokofiev is anything but naive—as letters home to his aunt Katya show, he was acutely aware that people could be arrested more or less at random (as were both his cousins)—and well understood the need for caution in correspondence. This bolsters the picture of him that emerges from his 1927 Soviet diary (published in English as *Sergei Prokofiev: Soviet Diary and Other Writings*, ed. Oleg Prokofiev and Christopher Palmer (London, 1991)). Though hindsight tells us clearly that Prokofiev's return was catastrophically mistimed, he would hardly have been alone in his misreading of conditions in Stalin's 'democratic' new Soviet Union. Plenty of major artistic figures, including the great theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold, judged it safe to remain at that time and, more to the point, preferred to do so. Not unreasonably, Prokofiev shared Meyerhold's belief that his international standing would protect him, and though Meyerhold was tragically deemed dispensable, it seems that Prokofiev's judgement was proved correct.

An inescapable issue for any Prokofiev biographer is the personality of the man himself. Both in the 1927 Soviet diary and in Nice's study, Prokofiev seems a far less arrogant figure than he does in, for example, Robinson's biography. In fact, Nice has rather carefully left out some of the harsher sketches painted by, among others, the composer's friend Nicolas Nabokov. Even Prokofiev's ruthless humiliation of the young David Oistrakh in 1927 (cited by both Robinson and Nestyev) barely receives a mention, though Nice reproduces many other well-aired anecdotes. This incident is of particular interest, since Prokofiev, who was a meticulous, even obsessive, diarist, did not mention it in his 1927 diary but recalled it gleefully to Oistrakh many years later. The mortification he felt when Oistrakh told him the identity of the young man to whom he had administered such a 'drubbing' demonstrates clearly that he well knew when he had overstepped the line. For those acquainted with his witty and lively *Avtobiografiya* (ed. Miralda Kozlova (Moscow, 1973)), Nice's Prokofiev may seem unnaturally sober and even-tempered. On the other hand, there are already numerous accounts of Prokofiev's allegedly rude, high-handed manner of dealing with people, and Nice's obvious empathy with his subject is a welcome

corrective. Balanchine's account of Prokofiev's unpleasant temper tantrum over royalties for *The Prodigal Son*, for example, gets short shrift from Nice on the grounds that it is simply too difficult to believe. After reading this far into the book, it is easy to share his scepticism. In large part, this is thanks to the emphasis he places on personal relationships with friends such as Myaskovsky rather than on racy anecdotes. Though Prokofiev's correspondence with Myaskovsky has been available in Russian since 1977 (Miralda Kozlova and Nina Yatsenko (eds.), *S. S. Prokofiev i N. Ya. Myaskovsky: Perepiska* (Moscow, 1977)), Nice is the first biographer to give full weight to their extraordinary and deeply touching friendship. His research in the Prokofiev archive, which contains Prokofiev's letters to his aunt Katya, also shows how sensitive Prokofiev could be: for instance, it was only on the advice of an old family friend that he very belatedly dared to break the news of his mother's death to his frail elderly aunt.

Another important issue raised by Nice's research is Prokofiev's attitude to Western modernism during the 1920s. In particular, Nice shows that Prokofiev's views on Stravinsky were far from clear-cut, and certainly not as critical as has frequently been made out. Though he was obviously offended and irritated by the Diaghilev–Stravinsky circle's rejection of *The Fiery Angel* as 'passé', and was later scornful about neoclassicism, Prokofiev was at least for a time insecure enough to tell Myaskovsky about his need to copy 'the young composers' who were composing for the kind of piquant wind and string ensemble used by Stravinsky in *The Soldier's Tale*. To Pierre Souvchinsky, Prokofiev explained that it was not Stravinsky's extreme views on musical form and orchestration that worried him—he understood Stravinsky's penchant for overstatement—but rather his sense that at the root of Stravinsky's criticisms of his music lay a preoccupation with modernity for its own sake. In this, of course, lies the kernel of Nestyev's rejection of Prokofiev's Western period—a rejection that Prokofiev himself later vigorously argued against.

But during the years when his visits to the Soviet Union were gradually drawing him to return, Prokofiev did indeed rebel against this tendency, and his growing conviction about his own path and the future of music is well expressed in a letter (also from the Prokofiev archive) to the then aspiring composer Paul Bowles. In his 1930 response to Bowles's confessed regret at missing out on the chance to study with Varèse, Antheil, and Virgil Thomson, Prokofiev replied with authority: 'it isn't

with them that music will move forward'. The following year, he was upbraiding the young Leningrad musicologist Mikhail Druskin for not being sufficiently critical of new trends: 'you bow and scrape before every empty "one-day butterfly" which we hear today but which tomorrow gets thrown onto the rubbish-heap'. Nice also quotes from Prokofiev's 1926 interview with Olga Samaroff in which he explained his conviction that a composer's real individuality was to be found in melody rather than harmony, declaring that the time for harmonic experimentation was drawing to a close. It is through snippets such as these that Nice guides the reader gently but firmly towards an understanding of the many and varied factors that finally led to Prokofiev's return to Russia. What emerges is a far more balanced discussion of music, correspondence, and events than may be found in any other English-language study, and one that significantly broadens the picture of Prokofiev's attitude towards his adopted culture as compared with the one he had left behind.

I have a few quibbles with regard to sources and bibliography. While it is understandable that Nice preferred not to list every review and newspaper article cited in the notes, to omit journal articles entirely from the bibliography seems unnecessarily drastic. In this respect, Robinson's biography is still the more useful scholarly resource. There are also a few disparities between the material cited in the notes and that in the bibliography; neither Balmont's *Sikhovoreniya*, Bryusov's *Fiery Angel*, nor Akhmatova's *Selected Poems* appears in the bibliography. The absence of Seroff's biography is surprising given its subsequent heated dismissal by Nestyev (thus playing a major role in East-West squabbles over Prokofiev), and Nice lists only the 1946 edition of Alexey Ikonnikov's study of Myaskovsky; there is a later edition of 1966, and a major two-volume study published in Moscow in 1982 (*Khudozhnik nashikh dney Nikolay Yakovlevich Myaskovsky*). It also seems odd to quote freely from the old *Shostakovich: His Life and Times*, edited by L. Grigoriev and Ya. Platek (Moscow, 1981), without at least including Laurel Fay's biography (*Shostakovich: A Life* (Oxford, 2000)) in the bibliography.

Frustratingly, the publication of Prokofiev's pre-Soviet diaries (*Dnevnik 1907–1933* (Paris, 2002)) just as Nice's manuscript went to press has prevented this study from being the ideal up-to-date resource it could have been. But in its present form, when joined by the second volume, its extensive use of new source materials and sensitive discussion of the music will still—in many respects if not quite all—make it

more broadly useful than any other English-language biography.

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Proof through the Night: Music and the Great War.

By Glenn Watkins. pp. xvi + 598; CD. (University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London, 2003, £35. ISBN 0-520-23158-9.)

Glenn Watkins does not write small books. His latest magnum opus opens with Baudelaire's evocation of the 'thunder', 'groans', and 'howling' of warfare, of humanity's destructive search for 'happiness'—a signal from the outset that this is a big, noisy, and provocative book. Watkins's stated aim—to explore 'the Great War's role in the birth of Modernism'—may be chronologically somewhat dubious (as Baudelaire's example surely attests), but at the book's heart lies awareness of the 'impossibility of viewing modernism as a progressive movement along a single continuum' (p. 2). The multiple lines of Watkins's narrative are drawn in terms of national identities, and this is highlighted in the introduction by quotations from Hobsbawm and Kozinn. Watkins's concentration within this nationalist battlefield is focused on the Allied response to German hegemonic *Kultur*. The enormous ambition of the project is clear: to assess the cultural impact of the war in developments ranging from expressionism, new objectivity, impressionism, neoclassicism, and popular song, all viewed through the filters of nationalism. His methodology, which relies on 'close readings' of minor 'art' works and popular song, is a refreshing attempt to 'address issues beyond the concept of the masterpiece'. (The accompanying CD illustrates this, with music examples ranging from miniatures by Debussy, Stravinsky, and Ravel to John Alden Carpenter's *The Home Road* and a 1919 recording of Noble Sissle, Eubie Blake, and James Reese Europe's *On Patrol in No Man's Land*.) Watkins's approach raises two central challenges. First, as he declares upfront, the book 'must be read . . . as an anthology of somewhat arbitrary, if also central, test cases that are obliged to stand for a host of equally compelling stories', with history presented as a 'resonating interdisciplinary collage' (pp. 2–3). Second, there is the 'sense of powerlessness that inevitably follows all attempts to reconstitute the first meanings of so vast and varied a repertoire' (p. 8). Into this interpretative minefield Watkins courageously advances.

Among a teeming multitude of characters