

PROGRAM NOTES

Sergei Prokofiev - Symphony No.1 "Classical"

By Susan Swinburne

Sergei Prokofiev was five years old when he composed his first piece of music. His musically trained mother transcribed his "Indian Gallop," which concentrated mostly on the white keys because he was disinclined "to tackle the black notes." He soon got over his aversion to the black keys, continued his musical endeavors, and by age nine was composing his first opera, *The Giant*.

An avid student of music, theory, and harmony, Prokofiev began very early to experiment in his compositions, exploring innovative harmonies, dissonance, and unusual time signatures while still a youth. By the time he was admitted for his high school years to the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, he had written many more pieces, including a series of short piano works, two more operas, and had another opera in the works.

It is all the more surprising, then, that twenty years after his first composition and the intervening schooling and experimentation, he chose in his mid-20s to write the "Classical" Symphony No. 1 in the style of Haydn and Mozart. While the composition includes some 20th century harmonies and musical twists never to be found in the 18th century masters' works, the form and content of Symphony No. 1 faithfully follows the tried and true symphonic pattern established more than 150 years earlier.

Although remaining dedicated to the fascination of new, dissonant and atypical musical idioms, Prokofiev was well aware that these innovations were not universally popular. In the midst of composing the Classical Symphony in 1917, he wrote in his journal that he could imagine, "... the public will no doubt just be content to hear happy and uncomplicated music which it will, of course, applaud."

Despite its simplicity and unfettered sunniness or perhaps, as Prokofiev noted, because of it – so at odds with his more serious and unusual musical preferences – the Classical Symphony has gone on to be a consistent favorite with audiences and appears often on concert programs.