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# Prokofiev and Propaganda

Famed Russian composer, Sergei Prokofiev, wrote the music score for the film, “*Alexander Nevsky*”, just before the onslaught of World War II when the government was trying to turn Russian sentiment against an increasingly powerful Germany. Prokofiev and directors, Sergei Eisenstein and Dmitri Vasilyev, used the film as a piece of war propaganda to help fuel this movement and create a sense of Russian nationalism. This paper will analyze how the film was marketed to the Russian people as propaganda with a focus on how the music contributed to villainizing the Germans and creating a sense of Russian nationalism.

## The Composer

Prokofiev was born in the Ukraine in 1891 to a middle-class family; his musical talent became obvious when he was only six years old and received much guidance from his mother who avidly studied piano (Samuel, 19-20). He became a musical prodigy while only in his teens while studying at the St. Petersburg Conservatory in Russia (Ross, A., 259). He was only eleven when he wrote his first four-movement symphony and orchestrated it. However, it was not until four years later that his work would truly start being noticed by the classical music community (Minturn, 7). Though he preferred and often worked best without the confining instruction of his teachers at the Conservatory, he still craved their approval and sought their respect. This element of his personality would eventually come to be influential in shaping the content of his compositions due to his need for validation from the Soviet government (Minturn, 9). Many of his major and most memorable works were inspired later on in his life after studying the music that was being created in Western culture, something he had been interested in from an early age. Sergei Prokofiev is perhaps best known internationally for his symphonic child’s story, *Peter and the Wolf*, in which each instrument takes on the persona of a certain character.

In 1918, he decided to leave the country in order to temporarily escape a politically tumultuous Russia with the downfall of the Tsarist regime in the wake of the Bolshevik

Revolution. He chose to head west and learn more about the musical innovations that were taking place there. Most of Prokofiev's time between 1918 and 1922 was spent in America where his pieces were both loved and misunderstood by audiences (Ross, A., 261). During his time there, Prokofiev was exposed to countless new advances in the music world that had not yet been widely used back home in Russia. His time in Hollywood would be especially influential to his career in the future when he would bring techniques such as, "technical knowledge in sound-film production," from the film industry back to what would become known as the Soviet Union (Seroff, 215). Before returning to the Soviet Union in 1927, he spent much of his time travelling through Europe and studying music in cities such as Paris and Berlin (Ross, A., 263). Up until his return, Stalin's secret police had been working to lure Prokofiev back to the Soviet Union to help advance Soviet culture and bring it up to speed with where the rest of the world was at. They were ultimately successful, and Prokofiev came home to restart the career he had begun in his home.

Upon his initial return to the Soviet Union, Prokofiev chose to ignore the blatantly obvious means the government was taking to maintain a tight control over society at large. Censorship and surveillance were everywhere and clicks could distinctly be heard over the telephone when someone was tapping into a conversation. Instead, Prokofiev decided to focus on all of the advancements the government had brought about and modernization that was occurring in the cities. This decision would ultimately cost him much creative freedom as the government refused to support any work that was unsatisfactory by their standards. He quickly learned this with the production of his dance epic, *Romeo and Juliet*. Soviet officials were displeased with Prokofiev's new interpretation of Shakespeare's tragic ending and secretly spread bad press about the show despite the extensive applause it had received from the civilian audience on opening night. After that fundamental failure, Prokofiev decided to try styling his compositions in the form of war propaganda in support of the Soviet state.

### **War Propaganda**

The Soviet government began much of its artistic control over composers just before Prokofiev made his return. They wanted compositions to be more nationalistic in nature and focus on the modern era the new government was helping to usher in. Those pieces that were reminiscent of folk songs from earlier in the country's history were often shunned and tarnished

by the government in order to prevent any sort of promotion of a time prior to their regime. Propaganda can best be defined as, “an expression overtly set forth or covertly implied in order to influence the attitudes and through the attitudes, the opinions and action of a public” (Ross, S.T., 17). It aims to motivate a particular group or population towards a certain belief without them being aware that it is happening. The era after World War I and preceding the Second World War was particularly known for the authority that was influenced on composers and artists alike to generate pieces that would reach the general population. In his novel about 20<sup>th</sup> Century classical music, critic Alex Ross describes this period in music as, “the total politicizing of the art by totalitarian means” (Ross, A., 237). Art was used as propaganda to influence the masses and turn whole countries against one another. The Soviets specifically, “selected aspects of Soviet achievements [to be] highlighted by Moscow as proof of the success of socialism” (Barghoorn, 3).

Prokofiev’s first few attempts at war propaganda compositions were again rejected by the government. Their attempts to sway popular sentiment were too conspicuous and strayed too far from his original style. It wasn’t until he came up with *Zdravista* that he was truly able to succeed. *Zdravista*, or “*Toast to Stalin*”, was so appreciated by the country’s dictator that it was broadcast from speakers onto the Streets of Moscow (Ross, A., 264). His subsequent work on the film, *Alexander Nevsky*, especially helped to further his newly realized career in propaganda.

### ***Alexander Nevsky* as Propaganda**

As previously mentioned, Prokofiev already had an extensive knowledge of generating film scores from his time spent in America. He was able to work closely alongside director, Sergei Eisenstein, to develop a film that used historical events to villainize the German people who had become an enemy to Russia through the events of World War I. The two artists were able to collaborate exceptionally well throughout their work on, *Alexander Nevsky*, mainly because Eisenstein treated his composers as equals and respected the role that music played in cinematography. They would watch scenes from the film late at night, and in the morning Prokofiev would have a new composition ready for it by noon. Of the composer, Eisenstein said that, “Prokofiev works like a clock. This clock isn’t fast and it isn’t slow” (Minturn, 159). Prokofiev and Eisenstein were able to create a film that visually and musically celebrated the

victory of the Russian people over the Germans, generating a feeling of nationalism and invincibility of the Soviet state.

*Alexander Nevsky*, revolves around the Russian hero of the same name who leads an army against the Germans as they advance on Novgorod, one of the last Russian held cities. Though the odds are set against them with a larger more powerful enemy advancing on them, the Russians still manage to overcome all odds and succeed in taking back their home. Nevsky is the ultimate picture of patriotism and courage and believes that, “It is better to die for your country than to leave it” (*Alexander Nevsky*, 8:04). This was an ideal that was heavily promoted by the Soviet government at the time as they worked to prevent people from fleeing the country to seek refuge elsewhere. Creating a hero who embodied this message worked as propaganda that would encourage Soviet citizens to do the same. His unwavering conviction to defeat any foe that dared to challenge his country is what inspired his army to give their lives and was intended to do the same for viewers within the Soviet state.

In his composition of the film score, Prokofiev used what he had learned from Hollywood and developed music that was cohesive with the images that were depicted. Instead of using 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century Catholic chants to go with the time period shown in the film, chants that would be alien and uninteresting to audiences, he decided to write the music as it would sound in his time (Seroff, 216). Elements of the original chants were still present in the score, but it had a more modern sound to it with melodies and harmonies added to the rhythm. He also faced challenges with the rudimentary recording equipment that was available at that time. The microphones would produce substantial feedback and create a crackling sound if a loud stream of sound was directed towards them. Rather than be discouraged, Prokofiev decided to use the negative aspects of the microphones to his advantage. Of this dilemma he said that, “...since the sound of Teutonic trumpets and horns were no doubt unpleasant to the Russian ear, in order not to miss the dramatic effect, I have insisted that these fanfares be played directly into the microphone” (Seroff, 216). He was able to use the defects in the sound to help portray the Teutonic, or German army, in a negative light. Even small elements in the film score were able to help turn the movie into a piece of propaganda.

## Film Score in *Alexander Nevsky*

The opening composition of the movie immediately introduces an ominous tone as the conflict is introduced with the Germans as the enemy. Strings rise and fall to create a dramatic effect and a clarinet wanders in with other winds and percussion as the scene opens on a field scattered with skeletons to create a tense polyphonic piece. A group of male vocals then enters, singing a war song to show unity and display their courage in fighting for their homeland; “We didn’t spare our blood, we shed it for the great Russia” (*Alexander Nevsky*, 4:27). The music becomes very grand and proud and would have created a sense of nationalism and pride in Russian viewers at the time. It instantly sets the tone for the rest of the film and introduces the Russians as the heroes. The composition starts up again a few moments later after Alexander’s interaction with the Mongols with the words, “The Russian land we shall never surrender” (*Alexander Nevsky*, 8:54). The effect of having so many voices sing together portrays a united Russian people who are all determined to protect their country no matter the cost.

A later scene opens in Pskov, a city recently destroyed and taken over by the German army. The composition that opens it is instantly ominous as the Germans stand before the defeated city. Harsh brass melodies and the clashing of cymbals bring about this mood. The pictures in the film may show the devastation that they have caused, but it is the music that truly defines them as an enemy to the Russian people. The music becomes more somber with the introduction of clarinets and other wind instruments as the Germans prepare to kill what remains of the Russian army. This change in tone is meant to generate sympathy in audience members for the people of the fallen Pskov and thus further support for the Russian cause. To advance this message, a brief, yet somber chant accompanied by high string notes and lower notes from the clarinet are added to the music as women and children are dragged away to be murdered in a pit of fire. The Russian people are the victims and the Germans enact a terrible cruelty upon them in their battle to control Russia.

After the people of Novgorod go forth to beg Alexander for his help, he agrees to fight but requires all that remain in the country to rise up with him. The next scene opens up with yet another patriotic chant accompanied only by brass and the concluding clang of cymbals. The opening words, “Arise, free people of Russia, rise to defend our land!” (*Alexander Nevsky*, 33:33), unify the country and show that they are one people with a common cause by referring to

it as “our” land. The lyrics commend the act of fighting and promise “eternal glory” to any who may fall during the fight. They call on the Russian people to come together to protect the land of their ancestors and take it back from the German foe. Female vocals are then added to further remind the men what they are fighting for and who they must protect as well as to encourage the women to join in the fight in any way that they can. Though set hundreds of years before the conflict that was being waged in Prokofiev’s Russia, the message that the Soviet government was trying to send was still the same as they tried to show the general population that the Germans were their common enemy after the First World War. The lyrics are not only speaking to the characters in the film, but to the members of the audience as well. The images the music is set to show people from all aspects of society coming together despite any differences they may have; simply because they are Russian, they are one people.

The music that leads the newly formed Russian army into Novgorod is intended to unify as well as bring hope. It is much softer and sweeter than the music that followed the German army and is played with much higher and more joyful notes. The brass that is added to it works with the strings to help uplift the composition and is not harsh which would make the tone menacing as was previously heard in Pskov. The patriotic war chant calling for Russia to rise up and fight is again introduced as Alexander’s army grows along with support for their cause. It continues as weapons are distributed and men and women alike prepare to fight for their country. Everyone is willing to sacrifice everything they have, even their lives, all for the cause of “Mother Russia” as the song proclaims.

As the film begins to reach its climax, Russian horns are blown to commence the infamous, “battle on the ice” between the two forces at Lake Chudskoe. They are much more clear and bright than those that were used by the Germans. Prokofiev made sure that the same microphone defects that added to the unpleasantness of the German horns were not present when the sound of the Russian fanfare was recorded so that they would be much more euphonious to the audience. The music that follows is very ominous with long sustained notes, foreshadowing the battle that will ensue. The notes climb to high pitches before a brief pause allows them to start low again and repeat their ascent. There is a longer pause in the music and the cacophonous German horns are sounded to announce the arrival of the enemy. A brief piano solo is played before the army begins its advance and strings play a quick high to low note sequence that

emphasize their progression. This gradually changes to brass with a rhythmic percussion beat following it. Playing the notes so quickly and with such rapid changes in pitch creates tension and anticipation in the scene and highlights the battle that is beginning. Prokofiev's piece stops only once the two sides finally clash. It starts up again as Alexander's troops join the fight and race to help their brothers. This time it is much more upbeat and uses the same melody from the Russian horns played earlier to announce their advance. It becomes polyphonic as different melodies weave together and symbolizes a Russian state that refuses to back down. Alexander is their hope and embodies everything a Russian should be, willing to do anything for his country. The notes become quicker and closer together as the new forces enter the fight. The music tells the audience that the Russians will be victorious and celebrates how they are willing to give up everything for their country. However, their victory does not last long: as the music becomes increasingly more ominous and resumes the low note brass melody of the Germans from the burning of Pskov, the German army gathers together, lowering their shields for a charge against Alexander's army. It reminds the audience that the Germans are the enemy and what terrible things they are capable of by reintroducing music from earlier in the movie.

The victorious upbeat music from Alexander's initial charge returns again as they drive out what remains of the German army following their leader's defeat at the hands of Alexander. Echoing notes are played on drums as the ice begins to crack and break apart under the Germans. Their theme song is heard again, but this time in much higher notes on the flute and clarinet. In their defeat, they are no longer the intimidating, ominous force they once were as is demonstrated through the film score. The songs transitions into a much more mournful melody as the Russians begin to walk among the fallen to find any who might still be alive. A single female vocalist begins to sing of the sacrifices that they have made saying, "They have fed with crimson blood... our righteous land, the Russian land" (*Alexander Nevsky*, 1:23:15). They are heroes because they gave everything for their country.

The piece that welcomes the army back to Pskov begins slow and sad for the procession of the bodies of fallen soldiers through the streets. It quickens instantly on the clarinet and has the busy sound of bees as defeated German soldiers are then lead behind them. The crowd is eager to see the men who had terrorized them now at the mercy of Russian soldiers. Finally, bells are sounded in celebration with the music once again taking on a victorious tone as Alexander

enters the city. The joyous strings and grand drums paint him as the hero that he is to these people.

### **Conclusion**

Elements of war propaganda are obvious all throughout *Alexander Nevsky*. Alexander is used to represent the ideals that the Soviet government wants its citizens to have with an unwavering need to challenge any foe who dares to attack the Russian Motherland. He will never retreat and encourages all of his men and their descendants to do the same. The film score that Prokofiev wrote helps to emphasize these messages and villainize the Germans through repeated themes that highlight their treachery and remind the audience of all that they have done to harm the Russian people. Harsh sounds are used to represent the German army and are unpleasant to the ear in order to accomplish this. The Russian army on the other hand, is portrayed by joyful notes that hark to their heroics. The lyrics in the songs are also especially filled with propaganda, characterizing Russia as a country that everyone should be willing to give their lives to protect. Prokofiev became a master of propaganda because that is what it took to survive as a composer at the time. His work was heavily influenced by it and he lost much of his creative freedom because of it as can be seen in pieces such as *Alexander Nevsky*.



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