

SERGEI PROKOFIEV

Alexander Nevsky

Melanie Sonnenberg, mezzo-soprano

DANIEL CATÁN

Cantata, Obsidian Butterfly

Escúcheme ["Listen to me"]

Cynthia Clayton, soprano

Texas Music Festival Orchestra, Houston
Moore's School Symphony Orchestra, Houston
Franz Anton Krager, conductor



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NOTES TO THE MUSIC



Obsidian Butterfly (1984)

The late Mexican composer **Daniel Catán's** extended cantata for soprano soloist, chorus, and orchestra was set in 1984 to a prose-poem penned by the noted Mexican poet and diplomat, Octavio Paz (1914-1996), a close friend and mentor to Catán. The occasion celebrated the 70th birthday of the 11-time winner of distinguished prizes in literature and linguistics.

Mariposa de Obsidiana portrays the Aztec warrior goddess Itzpapálotl, who presides over the paradise of dead infants. The poem's agonized lament depicts

Mexico's constant, often violent societal upheaval, evolving from one culture into another.

Paz's literary images evoke scenes that are terrifying or beautiful, with their contrasting effect often locked together. Reminiscences of an idyllic past are set against a violent present moment, but the poem ultimately suggests a peaceful era to come.

Catán's elaborate orchestral score and the dramatic vocal declamation vividly match the blend of mystery, horror, and beauty in Paz's poetic imagery. *Mariposa de Obsidiana* certainly pierces the heart of the listener, albeit gradually, over the course of an uninterrupted 20-plus minutes for soprano and orchestra. The orchestration surrounding the soprano, whose voice must travel into the lower, darker range of a mezzo, is kaleidoscopic, evoking a mysterious, natural landscape in what reads like a soliloquy of an ancient Mexican goddess:

"My body, plowed by your body, will turn into a field where one is sown and a hundred reaped. Wait for me on the other side of the year: you will meet me like a lightning flash stretched to the edge of autumn."

The Cantata concludes with a grandly majestic five-minute coda for large chorus, echoing key images of the goddess's elegy.



Below is a translation from the Spanish of the text from the Paz poem included in the Cantata:

They killed my brothers, my children, my uncles. On the banks of Lake Texcoco I began to weep. Whirlwinds of saltpeter rose from Peñon hill. They gently picked me up, and set me in the courtyard of the Cathedral. I made myself so small and so gray that many mistook me for a little pile of dust. Yes, I myself, the mother of flint and star, I, bearer of the ray, I am now but the blue feather that a bird loses in the brambles. Once, I would dance, my breasts high, and turning, turning, turning until I became still; then I would sprout leaves, flowers, fruit. The eagle throbbed in my belly. I was the mountain that creates as it dreams, the house of

fire, the primordial pot where man is cooked and becomes man. In the night of the butchered words, my sisters and I, joined in hand, leaped and sang around the I, the only standing tower in the razed alphabet. Singing in the green thicket the golden-throated light, the light, the headless light. In other times, every hour was born from the vapor of my breath, danced awhile on the point of my dagger, and disappeared through the shining door of my hand mirror. And I was the tattooed noon and the naked midnight, the little jade insect that sings in the grass at dawn and the clay mockingbird that summons the dead. I bathed in the sun's waterfall, I bathed in myself, soaked in my own splendor. I was the flint that rips the storm clouds of night and opens the doors of the downpouring rain. In the southern sky, I planted gardens of fire, gardens of blood. Its coral branches still graze the foreheads of the lovers. There, love is the meeting of two meteors in the middle of space, and not this obstinacy of rocks rubbing each other to ignite a sparking kiss. Each night is an eyelid the thorns never stop piercing. And the day never stops, never stops counting itself, broken into copper coins. I am tired of so many stone beads scattered into the dust. I am tired of this unfinished solitaire. Lucky the mother scorpion who devours her children. Lucky the spider. Lucky the snake that sheds its skin. Lucky the water that drinks itself. When will these images stop devouring me? When will I stop falling in those empty eyes? I am alone and fallen, a grain of corn pulled from the ear of time. Sow me among the battle dead. I will be born in the captain's eye. Rain down on me, give me sun. My body, plowed by your body, will turn into a field where one is sown and a hundred are reaped. Wait for me on the other side of the year: you will meet me like a lightning flash stretched to the edge of autumn. Touch my grass breasts. Kiss my belly, sacrificial stone. In my navel the whirlwind grows calm: I am the fixed center that moves the dance. Burn, fall into me: I am the pit of living lime that cures the bones of their afflictions. Die in my lips. Rise from my eyes. From my body gush images: drink in these waters and remember what you forgot at birth. I am the wound that does not heal, if you strike me, the world will go up in flames. Take my necklace of tears. wait for you on that side of time where light has inaugurated a joyous reign: the covenant of the enemy twins, water that escapes between our icy fingers, ice, petrified like a king in his pride. There you will split open my body to read the inscription of your fate.

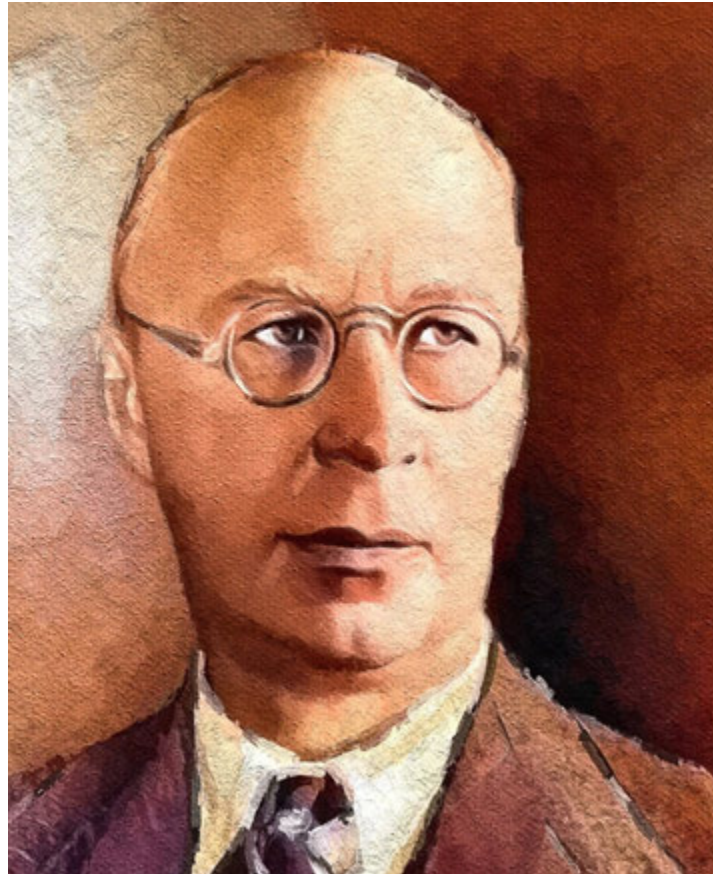
“Escúchame” from *Florencia en el Amazonas* (1996)

A different sort of butterfly is depicted in Catán’s Spanish-language opera, *Florencia en el Amazonas*. The work was commissioned by a consortium of American opera companies, including Houston Grand Opera, which gave the world premiere in 1996. A more recent production by the Moores Opera Center brought special praise from audiences for its warmth and beauty.

With a libretto by Marcela Fuentes-Berain, crafted in the magic realism style of author Gabriel García Márquez, the opera tells of the enriching emotional and physical transformations undergone by a group of people traveling up the Amazon River. They include the famed eponymous opera singer, who is returning to sing at the Manaus opera house in the secret hope of finding her long-lost lover. He had disappeared in the jungle during a butterfly-hunting safari. Her climactic aria, “Escúchame” (“Listen to

me”), portrays her excitement as she senses his unseen presence and magically transforms into an emerald butterfly seeking a reunion with him.

Adapted from notes by Carl Cunningham
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SERGEI PROKOFIEV

The Symphonic Cantata, **Alexander Nevsky** op. 78, was derived by Prokofiev in 1939 from the extensive 1938 film score he had composed for the film *Alexander Nevsky* from the pre-eminent Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein. The film emerged at a time of great tension and saber-rattling between the Soviet Union of Josef Stalin and the Germany of Adolf Hitler, which had recently signed with Russia an ill-fated - and soon breached - non-aggression treaty in August 1939. In this charged political atmosphere, the film production of *Alexander Nevsky* – with its theme of noble Russians defeating Teutonic aggressors – was an unqualified propaganda bonanza for Stalin as well as a smash hit with the film-going public.

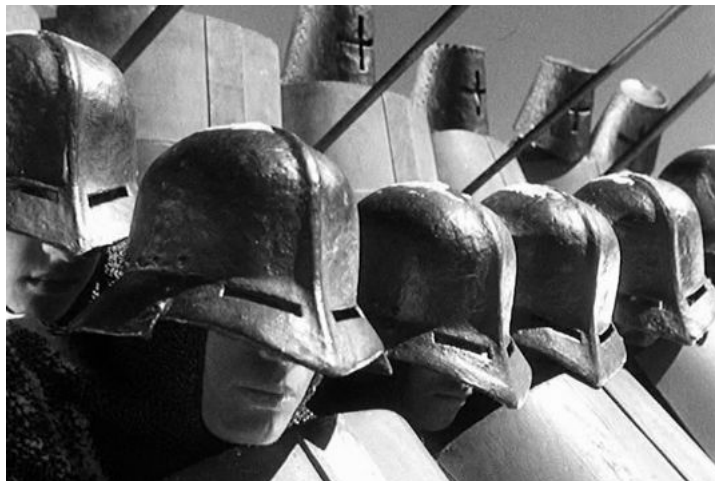
Eisenstein's film was an immediate box-office success beginning with its release on 1 December 1938, right after the November private showing for the Soviet government elite in the Bolshoi Theater. The enthusiastic public response prompted

Prokofiev to create a concert version of the music in the winter of 1938–39, not coincidentally in time for Stalin's 60th birthday celebrations.

He condensed the 27 film score cues into a seven-movement symphonic cantata scored for mezzo-soprano, chorus, and orchestra, as follows:



- (1) "Rus' under the Mongol Yoke". The opening movement begins slowly and somberly. It is meant to evoke an image of widespread destruction brought to Rus' by the invading Mongols.
- (2) "Song about Alexander Nevsky" represents the victory of Prince Alexander Yaroslavich over the Swedish army at the Battle of the Neva River in 1240. Alexander received the name 'Nevsky' ("of the Neva") in tribute. In it we first hear Prokofiev's strikingly beautiful themes at the heart of this masterpiece.



- (3) "The Crusaders in Pskov". For this movement, Prokofiev's initial intent was to use genuine 13th century church music; however, the examples he found in the Moscow Conservatory sounded so cold, dull and alien to the 20th century ear that he abandoned that idea and instead composed an original theme "better suited to our modern conception" to evoke the brutality of the Teutonic Knights.

- (4) "Arise, Russian People". This movement represents a patriotic call to arms for the people of Russia. Though original with Prokofiev, it is composed with an appealing folk-music affect.
- (5) "The Battle on the Ice". The fifth, and longest, movement is the dramatic climax of the cantata. It represents the final clash in 1242 between Nevsky's forces and the Teutonic Knights on the frozen surface of Lake Peipus. The quietly ominous beginning, representing dawn on the day of battle, grows inexorably in its representation of the onrushing invaders. The jarring, cacophonous middle section combines raucous shouts of the charging Knights contrasted with elements of the folkish themes of Nevsky's troops, with the orchestral trumpets blazing forth with the triumphal Nevsky theme.



- (6) "The Field of the Dead". In the bleak aftermath of the battle, the sixth movement is the sorrowful lament of a girl seeking her lost lover among the fallen, as well as kissing the eyelids of the dead. The vocal solo is performed by a mezzo-soprano.



- (7) "Alexander's Entry into Pskov". The seventh and final movement echoes the themes first heard in the second movement, this time with music of great nobility and jubilation, celebrating Alexander's triumphant return to Pskov.

There are many changes in the cantata as compared to the original film score. Prokofiev remarked to the film's sound engineer Boris Volskiy: "Sometimes it is easier to write a whole new piece than solder one together."

"Once the film made it to the screen, I had the desire to rework the music for symphonic orchestra and chorus. To create a cantata out of the music wasn't easy. I ended up expending much more labor on it than the original film. I first needed to provide it with an exclusively musical foundation, arranged in accord with the logic of musical form, with purely symphonic development; and then completely reorchestrated, since scoring for orchestra is of an entirely different [order] than scoring for a film. Despite my effort this second time around to approach the music from an exclusively symphonic perspective, the pictorial element from Eisenstein's film obviously remained." Letter of Prokofiev, 22 March 1942.



Alexander Nevsky, in the Moores Opera House, University of Houston

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The orchestra collaborates on a regular basis with the Moores Opera Center, MSM choirs and the Houston Ballet Academy. The high level of its performances has been hailed by international artists and critics alike as a student ensemble of professional quality and versatility.

Franz Anton Krager is Music Director of the Immanuel and Helen Olshan Texas Music Festival, held each summer at the University of Houston, and is also the Hourani Endowed Professor of Music, Director of Orchestras, and Chair of the Conducting Department at the University of Houston Moores School of Music, where he has brought the Moores School Symphony Orchestra and the conducting program to international prominence.



For **HDTT High Definition Tape Transfers** in its “Immersive Surround-Sound” series of multichannel Blu-Ray Audio discs and digital downloads, Krager has recorded music of Bruckner, his Great Mass in F-Minor and Symphony 7; of Respighi, his “Roman Trilogy” Tone Poems; of Leonard Bernstein, his *Jeremiah Symphony*, Symphonic Dances from West Side Story, and excerpts from “Candide”; of Mahler, his Symphony 2, “Resurrection”; and with organist Robert Bates, the Symphonie concertante of Jongen and the Organ Concerto of Poulenc. Forthcoming releases include the symphonic arrangement of “Death and the Maiden” by Schubert; Lincolnshire Posy by Percy Grainger, arranged for full symphony orchestra; Symphony 2, “Romantic” by Howard Hanson; Concerto for Orchestra by Rob Smith; and Cityscape by John Wineglass.

Krager has made his artistic presence felt both at home and abroad with performance engagements in some of the world's most celebrated concert halls and musical centers. Since making his prize-winning European conducting debut in Copenhagen's Tivoli Koncertsalen in 1978, Krager has led orchestras in the Leipzig Gewandhaus, Moscow's State Kremlin Palace, Manchester's Bridgewater Hall, Birmingham England's Adrian Boult Hall, Guangzhou China's Xinghai Music Center, the Sydney Opera House, The Hague's Congresgebouw, Kazan's State Philharmonic Hall in Russia, Guadalajara's Degollado Theater, and Sarasota's Van Wezel Performing Arts Hall.

His affiliations with leading music festivals include the Lancaster International Concert Series and Lichfield and Aberystwyth International Arts Festivals in the U.K.; the Festival Internacional de Santa Lucía in Mexico; and the Texas Music Festival and Interlochen National Music Camp in the United States.

Krager has led the Houston Russian State Traverse City, Michigan, and Florida West Coast Symphony Orchestras; Romanian and Kazan State Philharmonics; and orchestras in Berlin, London, Chicago, Paris, Singapore, Leipzig, Bratislava, Monterrey, Pordenone, Ingolstadt, Neuss, and Honolulu.

In 2015, he was appointed Principal Guest Conductor of the North Shore Chamber Arts Ensemble in Chicago. Krager is the Founding Co-Artistic Director of the Virtuosi of Houston, Artist-in-Residence at The Kinkaid School, and Evaluator/Clinician for the Orchestra America National Festival.

Cynthia Clayton, soprano, is Professor of Voice and Director of Undergraduate Studies at the Moores School of Music, University of Houston. She is an audience favorite in opera houses throughout the United States and overseas for her critically acclaimed performances of roles including Puccini heroines Tosca, Manon Lescaut, Mimi, Musetta, Liù, and Madama Butterfly; Mozart heroines Donna Anna, Donna Elvira, Pamina, Countess Almaviva, and Fiordiligi; and numerous others, such as Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, Nedda in *Pagliacci*, Violetta in *La Traviata*, Micaela in *Carmen*, Marguerite in *Faust*, Janáček's *Jenůfa*, Floyd's *Susannah*, and Catán's *Florencia (Florencia en el Amazonas)*.



For HDTT **"Immersive Surround Sound"** Blu-ray Audio Discs and digital downloads, she is soloist in the Resurrection Symphony of Mahler, the Great Mass in F-Minor of Bruckner, and this digital download of *Obsidian Butterfly* and *Escúcheme* of the late Mexican composer Daniel Catán.

Clayton has performed in leading roles at New York City Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Dallas Opera, San Diego Opera, Utah Opera, Cleveland Opera, Opéra en Plein Air (Belgium), Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Opera Grand Rapids, Anchorage Opera, Central City Opera, Opera Delaware, Arizona Opera, Fort Worth Opera, Knoxville Opera, Orlando Opera, Cedar Rapids Opera Theater, Opera Santa Barbara,

Intermountain Opera, Festival Opera of Walnut Creek, and Opera San José, where she was a Principal Artist in Residence for four seasons.

Clayton's concert performances have included appearances with orchestras across the country, in Barber's Knoxville: Summer of 1915; Verdi's Requiem; Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony; Britten's War Requiem; Handel's Messiah; Beethoven's Symphony 9; Mozart's Requiem and Solemn Vespers; Brahms' Requiem; Poulenc's Gloria; and Debussy's La Damoiselle Élué. In addition, she is an avid performer of recitals and chamber music, including Schoenberg's Pierrot Lunaire and a collection of Brahms Lieder.

Melanie Sonnenberg, mezzo-soprano, is Professor of Voice at the Moores School of Music, University of Houston and is the Director and Co-founder of Le Chiavi: The Institute of Bel Canto Studies, an intensive study program in bel canto for advanced singers sponsored by the Texas Music Festival. She is in demand as a national adjudicator and a clinician, and has previously served on the faculties of Westminster College of the Arts (2005-08) and The Catholic University of America (2007-08).



For HDTT "Immersive Surround Sound" Blu-ray Audio and Digital Downloads, she is soloist in this Blu-ray/CD of Alexander Nevsky of Prokofiev; the Jeremiah Symphony of Bernstein; the Resurrection Symphony of Mahler; and the Great Mass in F-Minor by Bruckner; also soloist in As You Set Out for Ithaca for Albany Records; Brahms's Alto Rhapsody; and Schubert's Ständchen with the Turtle Creek Chorale and the Fort Worth Chamber Orchestra for Reference Recordings. Her Merry Widow, Anna Bolena, Il viaggio a Reims, and Ring des Niebelungen performances are now available on DVD, CD through House of Opera.

Sonnenberg has impressed the music world with her distinctive mezzo-soprano interpretations, ranging from the *bel canto* to the French and Russian repertoire. Recognized as "a rich and fluent mezzo" by The New York Times, and "a master and virtuosa of voice" by Opernwelt, her leading performances throughout Europe, the

United States, and Canada, with such companies as the Hamburg Staatsoper, Teatro San Carlo, Graz Oper, Salzburg Festspielhaus, Tokyo Yoyogi Arena, New York City Opera, Washington National Opera, Dallas Opera, Seattle Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, San Diego Opera, New Orleans Opera, Austin Lyric Opera, Edmonton Opera, and Opera Ontario have garnered critical and public acclaim.

Possessing commanding dramatic and vocal skills, Sonnenberg has built a diverse operatic repertoire of nearly sixty roles. She has premiered new productions for the New York City Opera, performing Kontchakovna in Prince Igor, Marie De Pays in the American premiere of Jost Meier's *The Dreyfus Affair*, and the title role in *Carmen*. Among popular performances of some fifty *bel canto* productions, she sang the world premieres of the critical editions of *Il viaggio a Reims* (Marchesa Melibea) and *La Donna del Lago* (Malcolm). Her Carnegie Hall debut was as Smeton in *Anna Bolena* with the Opera Orchestra of New York. She has been a soloist with Little Orchestra Society of New York at Lincoln Center in their "Vivaldi's Venice" series and as Jocasta in *Oedipus Rex*, in addition to singing with the Buffalo Philharmonic, Grazer Philharmonic, Louisiana Philharmonic, Texas Music Festival, Princeton Festival Orchestra, San Antonio Symphony, Fort Worth Chamber Orchestra, St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, Bach Society of St. Louis, Baltimore Choral Arts Society, Victoria Symphony, and the Brazos Symphony. Her film and television credits include *Das Rheingold* (Flosshilde) and *Die Walküre* (Siegrüne) for Austrian Radio and Television; *Cavalleria Rusticana* for PBS "Live from Lincoln Center"; and *The Merry Widow* with Beverly Sills for PBS "Great Performances."

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DANIEL CATÁN (3 April 1949 – 9 April 2011)

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|-----|---|-------|
| [1] | Cantata, Mariposa de obsidiana [“Obsidian Butterfly”] (1984) | 23:43 |
| [2] | Escúcheme [“Listen to me”], from <i>Florencia en el Amazonas</i> (1996) | 08:37 |

Texas Music Festival Orchestra, Houston
Moores School Concert Chorale, *Jeb Mueller* – choral preparation
Cynthia Clayton, soprano
Franz Anton Krager, conductor

SERGEI PROKOFIEV (23 April 1891 – 5 March 1953)

Cantata, Alexander Nevsky, op. 78 (1938/1939)

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| [3] | Rus’ Under the Mongol Yoke | 03:02 |
| [4] | Song about Alexander Nevsky | 03:09 |
| [5] | The Crusaders in Pskov | 06:42 |
| [6] | Arise, Russian People! | 02:27 |
| [7] | Battle on the Ice | 14:26 |
| [8] | The Field of the Dead | 06:50 |
| [9] | Alexander’s Triumphant Entry into Pskov | 05:18 |

Moores School Symphony Orchestra, Houston
Moores School Concert Chorale and Combined Choruses
Melanie Sonnenberg, mezzo-soprano
Franz Anton Krager, conductor

Recorded in public concerts in the Moores Opera House, University of Houston
Catán – 10 June 2017; Prokofiev – 29 September 2017

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