

Fritz Reiner was one of the most acclaimed conductors of the 20th century -- noted for the vast range of his repertoire, which included both symphonic and operatic pieces spanning from the traditional canon to contemporary material, he was also an influential educator who counted among his pupils Leonard Bernstein. Reiner was born in Budapest, Hungary, on December 19, 1888; despite earning a law degree from the University of Bucharest, he pursued a career in music, and at age 21 was named chorusmaster of the Budapest Opera. A stint as conductor with the Budapest Volksoper followed before Reiner was chosen in 1914 to serve as principal conductor of the Royal Opera in Dresden, where he collaborated with Richard Strauss on productions of several of the composer's early operas.

In 1922 Reiner left Europe to relocate to America, settling in Cincinnati, OH, and signing on as conductor with the Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra; a decade later he was tapped to head the orchestral and opera departments at Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music, where his students included Bernstein. After next serving as the music director of the Pittsburgh Symphony between 1938 and 1948, he served five years with the Metropolitan Opera. While Reiner's frequent migration might have been attributed largely to a restless creativity, he was also a notoriously difficult personality who frequently alienated those around him -- many of the musicians under his command openly loathed him, although he inevitably inspired the best work of their careers.

Reiner's own best work was undoubtedly his tenure with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, which he elevated into one of the most celebrated ensembles in the world. Moving over to the CSO in 1953, he not only established the orchestra as a top-flight live attraction but also as a popular recording entity -- the countless albums they made for RCA's Living Stereo series during Reiner's decade-long tenure were much acclaimed by collectors for both the power of the performances and the unusually high fidelity of the recordings themselves. Releases like Fritz Reiner Conducts Richard Strauss and Fritz Reiner Conducts Bartók in particular remain definitive interpretations of the composers in question. Health problems forced Reiner to resign his position in 1962, and he died in New York City on November 15 of the following year.



SERGEI PROKOFIEV

ALEXANDER

NEVSKY

FRITZ REINER / CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA



In 1938 Prokofiev was approached by Sergei Eisenstein, an avant-garde Soviet film director, about writing music for a new state film: Alexander Nevsky. A 13th century Russian warlord, Alexander was famous for his military victories over the invading Swedes in 1240 and the Roman Catholic Teutonic Knights two years later. Alexander Nevsky would prove to be a good choice for a Soviet film, both artistically and politically. Up until this time, both Prokofiev and Eisenstein had held a precarious relationship with the Party leadership. Critics had accused their work of being overly complex and inaccessible, influenced by the decadent Western bourgeois. In contrast, Alexander Nevsky, though it would still make use of Eisenstein's innovative montage techniques and Prokofiev's highly individualized, sarcastic musical voice, was overtly nationalistic. The film presented an allegory that was clear and simple: Stalin was a modern-day Alexander, and if Germany (the Teutonic Knights) attacked Russia, they would regret it.

The Cantata we hear on disc is a seven movement work extracted from Prokofiev's film score. The Fritz Reiner performance on RCA LP (LSC 2395) produced by Richard Mohr was venerated by lovers of audiophile fidelity. The texts are sung in English. The movements refer to exact scenes in the film and are arranged chronologically.

I. Russia under the Mongolian Yoke - The Mongol horde has overrun Russia, leaving the land filled with the skeletons of Russian soldiers. Within the overarching mood of desolation, Prokofiev juxtaposes the full orchestra and wind soli, contrasting power and cruelty with pity and grief.

II. Song about Alexander Nevsky - This movement recounts how Alexander defeated the invading Swedes on the Neva River. The chorus praises Russians for their courage and challenges any would-be invaders with the warning, "Never shall we yield our native Russian land. Those who march on Russia shall perish." The song is wholly Russian in character; the more energetic sections feature a tambourine.

III. The Crusaders in Pskov - Heralded by a brass fanfare filled with clashing dissonances, the Teutonic Knights enter Pskov, claiming it for Rome. The music is dark and nasty, casting the knights as demons. (The film leaves little room for ambiguity in this case; it includes scenes of the knights dropping women and babies into a raging bonfire.) The pervasive Latin chanting in this movement serves to heighten the noxious atmosphere and to highlight the invaders' connection to the Church of Rome. It is not meant to infuse the movement with a specific literal meaning. The costumes in the film for the Teutonic Knights were inspired, according to director Eisenstein, by the hoods of the American Ku Klux Klan.

IV. Arise, Ye Russian People - When the Russians hear that the Teutonic Knights have

taken Pskov, they prepare for battle, exhorting each other to be brave and cleanse mother Russia of the invaders. The movement is in ternary, or ABA, form, and alternates between a march-like texture and a more legato, introverted one. Unlike the music, the tone of the text is insistently militaristic. The B section, which could otherwise be a love song, calls for the Russians to hold no quarter for enemies.

V. The Battle on the Ice - The Crusaders in Pskov - Heralded by a brass fanfare filled with clashing dissonances, the Teutonic Knights enter Pskov, claiming it for Rome. The music is dark and nasty, casting the knights as demons. (The film leaves little room for ambiguity in this case; it includes scenes of the knights dropping women and babies into a raging bonfire.) The pervasive Latin chanting in this movement serves to heighten the noxious atmosphere and to highlight the invaders' connection to the Church of Rome. It is not meant to infuse the movement with a specific literal meaning. The actual words ("Peregrinus expectavi, pedes meos, in cymbalis") make no sense. Cameras were mounted onto the horses' chests to plunge the viewer directly into the frenzy of battle. The Neva River itself becomes a character, swallowing the Teutons in retribution for their inhumanity.

VI. The Field of the Dead - A woman searches the battleground for two wounded soldiers; she has promised her hand in marriage to the braver of the two. Pianissimo strings and soli winds recall the first movement's tragic quality, and Prokofiev's use of solo mezzo-soprano (as opposed to full chorus) gives this movement an intimate, personal quality. As the woman passes soldiers fallen on the battlefield she sings: "He who died a noble death Shall have my kiss on his dead eyes, And to a brave one who survived the fray shall be a true wife and loving friend."

VII. Alexander's Entry into Pskov - As Alexander and his army march triumphantly into newly regained Pskov, the chorus sings a jubilant, celebratory chorale. After welcoming them back, the whole city dances to the music of a rozhok, a native Russian wind instrument. (In the cantata, as well as in the film score, the actual instrument used is the oboe.) As the rozhok music recedes into the background, Prokofiev brings in the tender B section theme from the fourth movement and superimposes it over the dance. The song builds in intensity until the trumpets usher in the celebratory chorale from the beginning of the movement at half tempo, accompanied with full percussion. The crescendo continues until the end: an ear-splitting chord of exultation.

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- 1-Russia Under the Mongolian Yoke**
- 2-Song About Alexander Nevsky**
- 3-The Crusaders in Pskov**
- 4-Arise, Ye Russian People**
- 5-The Battle on the Ice**
- 6-Field of the Dead**
- 7-Alexander's Entry Into Pskov**

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Producer: Richard Mohr Engineer: Lewis Layton



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