

George Szell (born June 7, 1897, Budapest, Hung., Austria-Hungary died July 30, 1970, Cleveland, Ohio, U.S.) Hungarian-born U.S. conductor. He made his debut as a pianist at age 11, and before his 20th birthday he had appeared with the Berlin Philharmonic as pianist, conductor, and composer. He established himself as an opera conductor in various German cities, including Berlin and Prague. When World War II broke out, he settled in the U.S., conducting at the Metropolitan Opera and then serving as musical director of the Cleveland Orchestra. There he imposed stern discipline but won his players' devotion by his own fierce dedication. Under his direction the orchestra became known for its precision in playing and was considered one of the world's finest.



# Prokofiev

## Symphony No. 5



**GEORGE SZELL / THE CLEVELAND ORCHESTRA**



Prokofiev composed this music in 1944, and conducted its premiere in Moscow on January 13, 1945. Everyone everywhere assumed that it symbolized "world-war agony and triumph" -- in other words, his counterpart of Dmitry Shostakovich's 1941 "Leningrad" Symphony. It was the composer's Sixth Symphony of 1945-1947, not his Fifth, that recollected the horrors of World War II. Those who insisted the Fifth Symphony was a mirror of wartime agonies didn't know that the scherzo movement was borrowed from Cinderella. Nor did Prokofiev help matters by issuing one of those "position papers" expected by Soviet officialdom: "I conceived [the Fifth] as a symphony of the greatness of the human spirit."

After the failure of his Fourth Symphony (a 1929 reworking of material from his then-recent ballet, *The Prodigal Son*), Prokofiev turned his back on the form. When finally he did return, his implicit model was Shostakovich's Fifth of 1937 -- four movements in concerto-grosso sequence: slow, fast, slow, fast. Otherwise, though, the music is pure Prokofiev both in substance and in style.

The inaugural Andante is a sonata-form movement that begins in 3/4 time with a fluid main theme played in octave unison by flutes and bassoon, with a tailpiece in triplets that later assumes a separate identity. A lot of working-over leads to a new tune in 4/4, introduced by flute and oboe. A jittery figure in the high and low strings acquires thematic status in the development that follows directly. Brass announce the reprise by playing the opening theme very dramatically. Rhetoric accumulates, culminating in a -- why not? -- "greatness of the human spirit" coda.

The Allegro marcato scherzo (in all but name) has a D minor, *Danse macabre*-ish song section, followed by a slightly faster, D major trio in waltz-time, borrowed from Cinderella without blinking (or acknowledgment).

The official slow movement is a passionately lyrical, ABA Adagio in F major that begins with a reminder of Aleksandr Nyevsky (1939), but continues in the mode of Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet* ballet. He changes keys frequently to intensify expression until the climax recalls Nyevsky's battle music. A slow introduction (lightly scored, based on music from the first movement) sets up this Allegro giocoso finale in B flat major. The strings begin a rhythm in bar 23 that prepares for merriment with a sweet-sour sauce. The clarinet plays a syncopated main theme recalling the high-spirits in *Romeo and Juliet*, prior to the deaths of Mercutio and Tybalt; this returns throughout a rondo-like movement. Prokofiev's finale amounts to a retrospective of his stylistic direction following Symphony No. 4 -- including a return to the U.S.S.R. in 1933 -- and ends with a tour-de-force coda.

The first performance was a triumph, the climax of Prokofiev's Soviet years, followed shortly after by a physical tragedy from which he never fully recovered. Dizzied by undiagnosed hypertension, he fell downstairs (where remains moot), causing a massive concussion.

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- 1 Andante 10:29**
- 2 Allegro Marcato 7:39**
- 3 Adagio 11:35**
- 4 Allegro Giocoso 9:04**

Producer - Howard H. Scott

Recorded by Columbia October 24 & 30, 1959, at Severance Hall, Cleveland, Ohio.



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