

PROKOFIEV: Peter and the Wolf
SIBELIUS: Symphony No. 2



Eleanor Roosevelt, narrator
Boston Symphony Orchestra
Serge Koussevitzky

Great Conductors: Serge Koussevitzky (1874-1951)

PROKOFIEV: Peter and the Wolf • SIBELIUS: Symphony No. 2 • GRIEG: The Last Spring

The Russian conductor Serge Koussevitzky was born on 26th July 1874, in a town outside of Moscow, into a musical family from which his first musical tuition came. Before developing his career as a conductor, which would come to fruition in 1924 when he was appointed Music Director of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Koussevitzky was a double bass player. He gave recitals on and composed a concerto for his instrument; in 1894 he also joined the Bolshoy Theatre Orchestra, becoming Principal of the double bass section in 1901 until 1905. Koussevitzky's early days (before the 1917 Revolution) were not confined to playing in the pit: he founded a publishing house, accepted conducting engagements in the West and also formed his own orchestra to tour in Russia. After the momentous events of the Revolution, although remaining in Russia for a while, Koussevitzky left for Paris and cultivating his conducting engagements, often leading premières of new music.

Koussevitzky's tenure of the Boston Symphony lasted from 1924 to 1949. This was a notable time during the Boston Symphony's history, owing to adventurous programming and wide-ranging commissions from international composers such as Hindemith (*Concert Music for Strings and Brass*), Honegger (*Symphony No. 1*), Prokofiev (*Symphony No. 4*, in its original version) and Stravinsky (*Symphony of Psalms*). American composers such as Barber, Copland, Harris, Piston and Schuman were also commissioned. In 1940 Koussevitzky, a dedicated teacher, established the Koussevitzky Music Center at Tanglewood (the Boston Symphony's summer home), where Leonard Bernstein was a pupil. Then, in 1942, in memory of his late wife, Natalie (the daughter of a successful tea-merchant), Koussevitzky formed the Koussevitzky Music Foundation. This commissioned, among other notable works, Messiaen's *Turangalila Symphony*, Aaron Copland's *Symphony No. 3* (which self-quoted *Fanfare for the Common Man*), Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*, of which Bernstein conducted the American première, and Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*. Earlier, in 1922, it was Koussevitzky who had asked Ravel to orchestrate Mussorgsky's piano-work *Pictures at an*

Exhibition, which is now the most famous of the many arrangements of Mussorgsky's original, an orchestral transcription that Koussevitzky recorded, as he did Bartók's *Concerto for Orchestra*, both now being coupled on Naxos 8.110105.

Koussevitzky made many recordings with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Those on this release were each recorded in 1950, when Koussevitzky was in his mid-seventies, and are therefore representative of his final years with the Boston Symphony and, indeed, were set down at a time when he had relinquished the office of music director, with Charles Munch already ensconced as his successor. These 'late' performances lack nothing in terms of passion or precision. The main works on this release are Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf* and Sibelius's *Symphony No. 2*; both composers were central to Koussevitzky's conducting.

Sergey Prokofiev conceived *Peter and the Wolf* in 1936 as a piece for children, both as an entertaining story and as a way of introducing youngsters to the wealth of the orchestra. In essence it is a sophisticated and ageless piece appealing to children of all ages. Prokofiev not only composed the music but also wrote the words to unify a wholly appealing diversion that marked the composer's return to Russia after a long absence. It was Serge Koussevitzky who made the first English-language recording of *Peter and the Wolf* (and possibly, therefore, the first recording in any language) – that was in 1939 with the Boston Symphony and with film-actor Richard Hale as narrator. In the near-seventy years that have elapsed since that 1939 version, and leaving aside the numerous adaptations of *Peter and the Wolf*, a multitude of personalities have essayed the narrator's part, including Peter Ustinov, Leonard Bernstein (who also conducted his recording), Sean Connery, Richard Baker, Angela Rippon, Willie Rushton, Alec Guinness, Ralph Richardson, David Bowie and – “Hello Possums” – Dame Edna Everage (Naxos 8.554170).

Joining Koussevitzky as narrator on his second version of *Peter and the Wolf* is Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962). From 1933 to 1945 she was the First Lady of the

United States, married to Franklin D. Roosevelt, who was elected, unusually, to four terms as U.S. President (in 1932, 1936, 1940 and 1944), and who unusually took a third four-year term, 'in time of war'. Eleanor was a Roosevelt by birth and marriage. Her uncle was President Theodore Roosevelt and his son, Franklin D., her future husband, was the fifth cousin of her father. "FDR", as he was known, died in 1945. After her husband's death Eleanor Roosevelt, a strong advocate of human rights, continued to be known for her writings and public-speaking engagements. From 1945 to 1952 she was a delegate to the United Nations General Assembly, a position conferred by incoming president, Harry S. Truman. In her narration of *Peter and the Wolf*, Eleanor Roosevelt may be thought something of a school ma'am (occasionally reminiscent of Joyce Grenfell's impersonation of one), giving a lucid exposition to introduce the characters of the story and the instruments that represent them. This is a rendition free of 'funny' voices in which fireside story-telling is sufficient to recount the yarn, with the music, as conducted by Koussevitzky, candidly illuminating the yarn.

Sibelius's *Symphony No. 2* was first heard in 1902 when the composer was 37. It is often referred to as nationalistic and as reflecting (then) the Finns' resistance to Russian domination. This appears not to have been Sibelius's intention even if the conductor and Sibelius's friend Robert Kajanus promulgated this 'programme'. It is a notion that Sibelius dismissed. The symphony's

gestation may have begun in the Italian town of Rapallo and certainly took wing later on Sibelius's travels. Thoughts that Sibelius had about writing a symphonic poem based on Dante distilled into a new symphony, which he mostly composed in the summer and autumn of 1901. The symphony's première was a great success. It is cast on an expansive scale, but is tightly organised, the first two of the four movements being changeable in character and, in particular, the volatile second one may be heard as evincing struggle. The third movement is a tempestuous scherzo enclosing a trio led by a sublime melody from an oboe. The finale brings a noble outpouring, the movement journeying to a victorious peroration – it is all too easy to hear this music in the way that Kajanus described.

Koussevitzky leads an emphatic, restless and edgy-sounding account, one capricious and dramatic and with no false sentiment or heroics; but it is not unrelenting, for light, shade and emotional retreat are evident. Recorded on 29 September 1950, this raw and impulsive performance of Sibelius *No. 2*, given with an electricity that transcends studio conditions, is from what proved to be Koussevitzky's last day of recording. The final such example of his art is the Nordic encore that is pertinently the last track of this disc, a rapt and expressive account of Grieg's *The Last Spring*, the warmth and intensity of the Boston strings bidding a poignant 'farewell to music' for the players' illustrious maestro.

Colin Anderson



Great Conductors: Serge Koussevitzky

- PROKOFIEV: Peter and the Wolf, Op. 67** **25:27**
- 1** *Dear children* 4:06
- 2** *Soon, a duck came waddling around* 3:49
- 3** *Grandpapa came out* 4:56
- 4** *And now, this is how things stood* 4:04
- 5** *Meanwhile, Peter made a lasso* 4:28
- 6** *And there they go!* 4:05
- Eleanor Roosevelt, narrator**
- Recorded 11th August, 1950 in the Theatre-Concert Hall, Tanglewood
Matrices: E0-RC-1708 through 1713 • First issued on RCA Victor DM/WDM-1437 and LM-45
- SIBELIUS: Symphony No. 2 in D major, Op. 43** **41:30**
- 7** Allegretto 9:48
- 8** Andante 12:22
- 9** Vivacissimo 5:49
- 10** Allegro moderato 13:31
- Recorded 29th November, 1950 in Symphony Hall, Boston
Matrices: E0-RC-1950 through 1959 • First issued on RCA Victor WDM-1602 and LM-1172
- 11** **GRIEG: The Last Spring (Elegiac Melody, Op. 34, No. 2)** **5:44**
- Recorded 29th November, 1950 in Symphony Hall, Boston
Matrix: E0-RC-1960 • First issued on RCA Victor ERA-195

Boston Symphony Orchestra Serge Koussevitzky

Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
Special thanks to Kevin Mostyn and Langdon F. Lombard for source material

Producer's Note

The three recordings on this disc were originally mastered on tape and were released on 78 rpm (Prokofiev), LP (Prokofiev, Sibelius) and 45 rpm (all three works). The transfer of the rare Prokofiev set was taken from the best portions of four 45 rpm sets, while a combination of 45 rpm and LP sources was used for the Sibelius, which allowed for the correction of some problematic side joins which have plagued previous transfers of this recording. The Grieg was dubbed from a tape source.

The Prokofiev was only issued in the USA, and has not been available in any format for over half a century. The Grieg, taped at the tail end of the same session as the Sibelius symphony, was the last recording Koussevitzky made before his death in June, 1951.

Mark Obert-Thorn

Playing
Time
72:42

8.111290
PROKOFIEV: Peter and the Wolf
SIBELIUS: Symphony No. 2
Serge Koussevitzky (1874-1951)



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Eleanor Roosevelt, narrator
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This disc restores to the catalogue, after an absence of more than 50 years, Koussevitzky's second recording of *Peter and the Wolf*, with Eleanor Roosevelt as narrator. Taped during his last recording sessions on 29th November, 1950, Koussevitzky's performance of Sibelius's *Symphony No. 2* is given with an electricity that transcends studio conditions, yet it is not without light, shade and emotional retreat. The final such example of Koussevitzky's art, which pertinently concludes this disc, is a rapt and expressive account of Grieg's *The Last Spring*, notable for the warmth and intensity of the Boston strings.

Reissue Producer and Audio Restoration Engineer: Mark Obert-Thorn
 Special thanks to Kevin Mostyn and Langdon F. Lombard for source material
 Cover photo: Serge Koussevitzky, 1950 (Private Collection)

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