

# **“Peter and the Wolf”--Serge Koussevitzky, conductor; Richard Hale, narrator; Boston Symphony Orchestra (1939)**

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**Essay by Brad Weismann (guest post)\***



*Prokofiev*



*Koussevitzky*



*Hale*

The official term for music that educates is pedagogic music, and most of it is just as awful as that sounds. Official culture in every society seeks to inculcate its values, moral and aesthetic, in each of its young generations, and many a child has been bored to tears by something earnest and condescending it is thought they “should” like. It’s a rare piece of music that remains as fresh and persuasive as “Peter and the Wolf.”

In classical music, there are a number of designated “kid-friendly” pieces that serve as gateways to Western art music, the symphonic world--Saint-Saen’s “Carnival of the Animals,” Britten’s “Young Person’s Guide to the Orchestra.” There are inadvertently famous classical riffs as well, and some children graduate into a love of the classical music they only heard snatches of. The Lone Ranger’s signature music is eventually understood as the overture to Rossini’s opera, “Giulluame Tell,” and the grand three-note opening theme from “2001: A Space Odyssey” becomes Richard Strauss’ “Also Sprach Zarathustra” (especially as taught by kid-friendly composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein at one of his televised Young People’s Concerts).

One of the most successful of these compositions is Russian composer Sergei Prokofiev’s “Peter and the Wolf,” a “symphonic fairy tale for children” written in the Soviet Union but first recorded in America by Serge Koussevitzky and the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Since its premiere, it’s been recorded more than 400 times, in a dozen languages.

The young and enterprising Prokofiev left the fledgling Soviet Union in May, 1918; after many successes, he returned permanently in 1936. There, educator Natalya Sats asked him to write a

piece that would teach instruments of the orchestra to children, for her Central Children's Theatre.

The official culture of the day in the USSR was socialist realism, a style that featured idealistic depictions of the common man, depictions that were mandated, reviewed, critiqued, and censored by the central government. A useful work of art taught a moral lesson and reinforced Soviet values. For a libretto, Prokofiev started with a rhyming narrative by popular Soviet children's writer Antonina Sakonskaya, about a Young Pioneer (the Soviet equivalent of a Boy Scout) challenging an adult mired in reactionary, pre-Revolutionary thinking.

Dissatisfied, Prokofiev tossed the original poem aside and wrote his own story in prose. Turning to the music, he completed the piano score in less than a week, and the orchestration in another. "Peter and the Wolf" debuted on May 2, 1936 at a children's concert by the Moscow Philharmonic. The American premiere took place in Boston in March, 1938, due to the presence there of Koussevitzky.

Serge Koussevitzky was another Russian, but one who chose life in the West after the Russian Revolution. A respected bassist and composer, his financial situation enabled him to advance his career by doing such things as hiring the Berlin Philharmonic for his conducting debut and forming a dominating music-publishing company that printed the work of composers such as Scriabin, Rachmaninoff, Stravinsky, and . . . Prokofiev. Koussevitzky led the ensemble during a period of artistic greatness. (The primary performance space at the BSO's legendary summer concert venue Tanglewood bears the name of the Koussevitzky Music Shed.)

According to Koussevitzky biographer Moses Smith:

Prokofiev appeared as a soloist and guest conductor for a program of his own music which included "Peter and the Wolf" in its first American performance. In a pre-concert interview with newspapermen he had pointedly alluded to the bad reception Boston had previously accorded his more "serious" works, which he was accordingly omitting from the forthcoming program.

Prokofiev biographer Simon Morrison adds, "Prokofiev informed a 'Time' magazine reporter that because audiences in Boston could not grasp his 'serious music,' he was obliged to pander to them with 'simple things.'"

Despite the composer's deprecating comments, the simplicity of the composition is not to be confused with a lack of quality. It's the story of young Peter, who, defying his Grandfather's words of warning, defeats and captures a hungry wolf, with the aid of a few animal friends. Each character has a dedicated instrument and a distinct theme--what Wagnerians would call a leitmotif. Peter is voiced by the strings, and there is his grumpy Grandfather (bassoon), a bird (flute), a duck (oboe), a cat (clarinet), and the wolf himself (French horns). With precision and economy, Prokofiev sketches out the characters thematically as he moves the story along.

The role of the Narrator in the performance is key, and the debut recording features Richard Hale as such. The respected baritone was a frequent concert-hall performer; in later years he turned to

character acting in films, becoming a familiar face in fare such as “To Kill a Mockingbird” (1962). Hale gives the reading a directness and emotional force absent in many other renditions of the role. In Hale’s performance, the story is thrilling and vital.

After the premiere in Boston, Prokofiev toured America in 1938. He made a point of going to Hollywood and playing “Peter and the Wolf” for Walt Disney, in the hopes he would craft an animated film based on the score. Disney nearly added a “Peter and the Wolf” segment to his animated/classical music anthology “Fantasia” (1940), but eventually produced it as a segment of the anthology “Make Mine Music” in 1946.

The premiere recording exists as a six-part set of 78-rpm records bound together (these bulky, heavy folders gave us the phrase “record album”). The initial release was wildly popular, and soon recording followed recording, sporting narrators as varied as Boris Karloff, David Bowie, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Alice Cooper. “Peter and the Wolf” is popular--and sturdy--enough to endure hundreds of renditions.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.