

Oslo Philharmonic review: Vasily Petrenko makes Prokofiev's War Symphony shine like never before
5/5

The Russian conductor softens Prokofiev's rough edges in a new CD that pairs his Fifth Symphony with a work by his friend Myaskovsky

By Ivan Hewett, CLASSICAL MUSIC CRITIC

Prokofiev's Fifth Symphony is known as his "War" Symphony, as it was completed in the closing months of the Second World War. Its premiere on January 13 1945 is one of classical music's legendary scenes. The Soviet Union's sufferings in the war, which were greater than any other nation's, were almost over.

The Red Army was making its final push towards Germany, and that very day won a decisive battle at the river Vistula. In Moscow in the evening there was a long salvo of cannon-fire in celebration – just as Prokofiev was mounting the podium at the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory, and raising his arms to conduct his new symphony. According to the great pianist Sviatoslav Richter, Prokofiev waited and began only after the cannons had stopped. "There was something very significant in this, something symbolic," he recalled later. "It was as if all of us – including Prokofiev – had reached some kind of shared turning point."

Every conductor who performs this symphony knows that story, and they'll almost certainly be aware of Prokofiev's description of the symphony as "glorifying the human spirit... praising the free and happy man – his strength, his generosity, and the purity of his soul". These things must have a special significance for the Russian conductor Vasily Petrenko, and on this new recording with the Oslo Philharmonic he does his utmost to reveal that "purity of soul". It's not a straightforward task, as the symphony is as often sardonic and gleefully high-spirited as it is noble and triumphal. There are moments that could easily depict the Ugly Sisters in his ballet Cinderella. And when the music strives for nobility its fine ideas are sometimes spoiled by coarse over-use of the brass section.

Petrenko is aware of this, and his determination to refine the sound and soften Prokofiev's sharp edges is revealed in small ways as well as large ones. For instance, in the first movement the piano is used simply to thicken the texture, like pulses in a stew, so Petrenko brings its dynamic right down, allowing the instrumental colours around it to shine out more brightly. In the perky second movement, however, he brings the piano to the fore, because here Prokofiev uses it in a much more imaginative way.

In the slow movement Petrenko adopts a far slower tempo than the composer recommends, which seems a risky move at first but eventually pays off as it allows him to plumb the music's depths. Everywhere Petrenko conjures fabulously refined playing from the Oslo Philharmonic, so the more subtly scored pages – of which there are many – really shine in all their intricacy. It's a performance that makes the piece seem better than it really is, and one can't give higher praise than that.

Alongside Prokofiev's symphony is the single-movement Symphony no 21 by his friend and younger compatriot Nikolai Myaskovsky. Composed around five years before Prokofiev's Fifth, it has all the elements which Stalin approved of – martial valour, slightly folk-like melodism, and a near-Tchaikovskian romanticism, all paraded in turn – and none of the sardonic humour that the dictator distrusted. If that sounds incoherent, or even a touch dull, this sympathetic and beautifully polished performance proves the symphony is anything but.

Prokofiev: Symphony No 5 / Myaskovsky: Symphony No 21 is out now on CD from Lawo Classics

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