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# Reconstructing the *Alexander Nevsky* film score

Sergei Prokofiev's significant contribution to the history of film music is documented in his score for Sergei Eisenstein's movie *Alexander Nevsky* (Soviet Union, 1938). Never before and seldom after has there been a movie with this unique and perfect "marriage" of visual and aural elements. The movie has been subject to many scholarly studies, from both musicologists and film historians.

*Alexander Nevsky* was produced as a Soviet propaganda movie shortly before World War II and was a milestone in the development of cinematography as a new art form in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There are good reasons, besides the outstanding musical score by Sergei Prokofiev, to present the movie to today's audiences in concert halls in the United States and around the globe. IMG Artists includes *Alexander Nevsky* in its "Performance with Film" series.<sup>1</sup> Screenings of the movie, accompanied by live orchestra, chorus and soloist, have been recently performed in New York (October 2006; New York Philharmonic, Xian Zhang, conductor) and Houston (May 2005; Houston Symphony Orchestra, Hans Graf, conductor); at least one is scheduled for the next year (June 2007; Los Angeles Philharmonic, Esa-Pekka Salonen, conductor).

Although these events have invariably been very successful, they do not present Sergei Prokofiev's original film score. The music performed is an arrangement by William Brohn, which was initiated by producer John Gوبرman in 1986. Unfortunately, only a few know that in October 2003 and in November 2004 there were two performances featuring the complete original film score by Sergei Prokofiev as recorded in 1938 and reconstructed in 2003.

Based on my master's thesis (the first scholarly approach to the recent reconstruction<sup>2</sup>), I want to explain the need for such an elaborate undertaking. The article will document the reconstruction process and compare the arrangement by William Brohn and the original film score by Sergei Prokofiev. Finally, the film score (as well as the composer's position in the Soviet Union) will be available for a new (and overdue) scholarly debate.

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### 1. The reconstruction by William Brohn

André Previn once remarked that Sergei Prokofiev's music for *Alexander Nevsky* was "the greatest film score ever written trapped inside the worst soundtrack ever recorded."<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the original soundtrack recording from 1938 is overdubbed with speech and sound effects and is plagued by the technical limitations of overmodulation, distortion, wow and compression; the musical performance resembles that of a sight-reading high school orchestra.

In 1986 producer John Goberman conceived the idea of performing the *Alexander Nevsky* film score with an orchestra, chorus and soloist live with the movie. Since Sergei Prokofiev's composition documents were not accessible (they were preserved in Soviet archives behind the "Iron Curtain"), John Goberman asked orchestrator William Brohn to reconstruct the film score by adjusting selected parts from the concert cantata *Alexander Nevsky*, Op. 78 to the corresponding sequences in the movie. Musical cues that are not included in the concert cantata's score were transcribed by ear off the soundtrack. In 1996, conductor Yuri Temirkanov, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra and Choruses and mezzo-soprano Eugenia Goroshovskaya released the music on the RCA label.<sup>4</sup>

Although William Brohn's arrangement and its worldwide success are a great achievement, some artistic decisions were made that, in retrospect, challenge the authenticity of this version of the *Alexander Nevsky* film score (and its resulting interpretation):

1.) William Brohn took some musical material from the concert cantata and created an overture to be performed during the movie's originally silent opening credits. Boris Volski, who worked as sound engineer during the recording sessions, gives an account of Sergei Eisenstein asking the composer for an overture – his wish was not granted. The composer argued that the movie opened with the tragic episode "Russia under the Mongolian Yoke" and that the overture would have to be victorious and heroic; he, Sergei Prokofiev, could not write an appropriate transition from a triumphant overture to the depressing mood of the opening sequence. William Brohn's overture is based on the ending of the cantata's "Battle on the Ice", and even though this music is everything but victorious and heroic, its existence as an overture fundamentally contradicts the composer's intentions.

2.) Although the concert cantata *Alexander Nevsky*, Op. 78 traces back to the film score, it had to meet completely different artistic demands. Premiered on May 17, 1939, it originated as one of Sergei Prokofiev's occasional compositions, which were written (under the pressure by the Soviet regime) to glorify the Russian people, its history and, above all, its unrestrained political dictator, Joseph Stalin. The most obvious difference between the film score and the concert cantata can be found in the instrumentation: whereas the concert cantata (especially the last part, "Alexander's Entry into Pskov") presents itself as bombastic and blatantly declamatory, the film score's instrumentation is surprisingly sober und contained. As I will explain at a later point, applying the concert cantata's lavish (over-)instrumentation for the film score must inevitably lead (and already has led) to a misinterpretation of the movie's intention.

## 2. The reconstruction in 2003

Since its foundation in 2000, the European FilmPhilharmonic has been advocating the importance of performing film music in concert halls in Germany and Europe. Yet it is not an orchestra but a European association of various orchestras, musicologists, composers, film historians and film archives (which handle the film restorations). The institution is especially dedicated to raise awareness of the connection between silent (or early sound) movies and film scores written by some of the greatest “classical” composers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The catalogue of projects available for performance includes *The New Babylon* (music by Dimitri Shostakovich), *Der Rosenkavalier* (music by Richard Strauss), *Metropolis* (music by Gottfried Huppertz) and many more cinematic treasures.<sup>5</sup> Artistic Director of the European FilmPhilharmonic is German conductor Frank Strobel, whose intensive preoccupation with film music for more than 20 years has resulted in various contributions to the community. For example, he compiled and recorded many of Alfred Schnittke’s film music suites, he has toured Germany with the Hamburg Symphony Orchestra, presenting a film music program, and he has initiated the reconstruction of scores and the restoration of film copies.<sup>6</sup>

The reconstruction of the *Alexander Nevsky* film score was an exemplary collaboration of German and Russian institutions. After protracted negotiations between the editors of Sikorski music publishers in Germany on the one side and Sergei Prokofiev’s heirs and the Russian government on the other, a facsimile of the manuscript, the short score and sketches were finally released by the Glinka State Central Museum of Musical Culture and the Russian State Archive for Literature and Art (spring 2003). The manuscript, which consists of about 70 pages (11” x 17”), contains about 90% of the music; the sketches (about 30 pages) illustrate the composer’s considerations regarding themes and instrumentation. However, as Sergei Prokofiev had noted his ideas about the revised instrumentation for the concert cantata into the rather plain film score, both “layers” had to be separated from each other and related to either the film score or the concert cantata. This process was facilitated by the fact that Sergei Prokofiev had used a different pencil for his subsequent re-orchestration. Cues that could not be found in the autograph were reconstructed based on the short score, the sketches and, in a very few instances, by ear. The reconstructed film score is divided into 27 cues (about 55 minutes of music) and features the intended instrumentation, articulation and dynamics.<sup>7</sup>

It is necessary to mention that there are two aural elements that can be attributed, depending on a given film sequence, to either the film music or the soundscape – the organ music and the bells. Both the organ music and the bells were included in the (printed) film score when they were interpreted as artificial musical elements (the organ accompanying the crusaders’ chant, for example); they were left on the soundtrack when they could be interpreted as authentic visual elements (the alarm bells, for example).

### 3. Problems

Before the original music could be premiered in Berlin on October 16, 2003, some performance problems had to be solved:

1.) Whereas John Goberman and William Brohn had been able to use a film copy whose soundtrack consisted of three separate tracks (for the soundscape, the dialogues and the film music), the recent live performances had to work with a film copy whose three separate tracks had been mixed down to one; other film copies cannot be found, they may have been destroyed in the meantime. Hence, sound engineer Wolfram Nehls created a new soundtrack by omitting all music-only sequences; sequences that have dialogue and sound mixed into the music are still on the soundtrack.

2.) The pitch of the recorded film score in 1938 diverges from the pitch of the written film score; this divergence is sometimes exactly a quarter tone and can be explained by the assumption that Sergei Prokofiev's original recordings must have been compressed or stretched to be in sync with the movie's tempo. Wolfram Nehls reacted to this circumstance by adjusting the pitch digitally.

3.) Given the fact that in some sequences the original film music can be still heard behind the soundscape and the dialogues, Frank Strobel had to develop a method of conducting the orchestra, chorus and soloist most precisely in sync with Sergei Prokofiev's original recording left on the soundtrack. He mastered this challenge by creating a click track; it turned out that the music on the soundtrack cannot be heard when the musicians performed in absolute sync.

4.) To change the sound of certain instruments (the Teutonic trumpet fanfare, for example), Sergei Prokofiev experimented with the recording devices. By having the instruments play directly into a microphone's membrane, he altered the recorded sound to make it appear more "barbaric." Frank Strobel achieved a comparable effect by copying the concert cantata's offstage orchestra, wrapping the instruments' horns with aluminum foil and having the musicians play into a stretched snare drum.

### 4. Live performances

The premiere of the reconstructed *Alexander Nevsky* film score was given by the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra, the Ernst Senff Choir and soprano Marina Domashenko, conducted by Frank Strobel, on October 16, 2003 in Berlin; the same cast recorded the music for the Capriccio label.<sup>8</sup> The performance was repeated (with a different soloist and chorus) in Moscow on November 27, 2004; both concert halls were fully sold out, with many more interested people outside. A U.S. premiere has not yet been scheduled.

The performances in Berlin and Moscow were followed by thorough and controversial debates among (film) historians about Sergei Eisenstein's movie and Sergei Prokofiev's film score, and about the connection between art and politics in a society ruled by a repressive regime. My master's thesis, which has been the only comprehensive scholarly approach to date, documents this intensive discussion.

## 5. Re-evaluation

Sergei Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* film score has often been criticized as sounding too declamatory and the composer was accused of glorifying the film's hero. Now that the film score can be heard again in its original conception, some of these points can be reviewed.

Most of the criticism alludes to the final sequence. Having defeated the Teutonic (figuratively: German) army, Prince Alexander Nevsky (figuratively: dictator Joseph Stalin) returns to the City of Pskov and celebrates the victory; the movie ends with a close-up shot of Alexander Nevsky and the title: "Whoever will come to us with a sword, from a sword will perish." I will compare the corresponding parts in the concert cantata and the film score by analyzing the orchestration.

*Alexander Nevsky*, Concert Cantata, Op. 78  
VII. Alexander Nevsky's Entry into Pskov

*Alexander Nevsky*, film score  
cue 22, measures 35-54

1 piccolo flute	---
2 flutes	2 flutes (in unison)
2 clarinets	2 clarinets
1 bass clarinet	---
1 saxophone	---
2 bassoons	---
1 contrabassoon	1 contrabassoon
---	1 trumpet
4 horns	4 horns
3 trombones	3 trombones (in unison)
1 tuba	1 tuba
percussion (cymbals, gran cassa, timpani)	percussion (bells)
1 harp	2 harps (in unison)
chorus	---
first violin	first violin
second violin	first violin
viola	---
cello	cello
bass	bass

The difference is stunning: not only does Sergei Prokofiev abandon the chorus, who in the concert cantata emphasizes and intensifies the movie's propagandistic message by singing the critical words; the composer also creates a certain sound effect by employing only select instruments. Since the sound of an orchestra (and its impact on an audience) is defined by the ranges of various instruments (from very high to very low) and their combination, it is interesting to observe that this cue lacks instruments that contribute to a wide range (the piccolo flute and the bass clarinet) and instruments that add to the so-called medium register (the saxophones, the clarinets and the violas). The sound resulting from this orchestration evokes a sober and empty impression in the listeners, leaving them with the feeling of uneasiness. In short: the aural information contradicts the visual information. Why does Sergei Prokofiev deny Alexander Nevsky the excessively solemn glorification which is granted in the concert cantata?

It has already been mentioned that the persona Alexander Nevsky has to be regarded as a nonhistorical portrayal of Joseph Stalin. It is also generally accepted that Sergei Prokofiev was suffering severely from his continuing repression by the Soviet regime; his private diaries speak a different language from his public writings. Whereas Dimitri Shostakovich expressed his political opinion in some of his compositions (for example the Fifth Symphony and the Ninth Symphony), Sergei Prokofiev chose a more subtle way to revolt against his oppressors. It seems ironic that Joseph Stalin awarded the director and the composer with prizes for their artistic achievement, although at least one of the two men voiced his criticism even in the dictator's presence (in a figurative sense, of course).

## 6. Conclusion

The reconstruction and the performances of Sergei Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* film score in 2003 can be regarded as the beginning of a new chapter in the understanding of this composer. It is certainly necessary that future screenings of the movie be accompanied by the original film score; raising a critical awareness for Sergei Prokofiev's significant contribution may be the first step towards a revision of some common traditional misapprehensions.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.imgartists.com](http://www.imgartists.com)

<sup>2</sup> Ulrich Wünschel, *Sergej Prokofjews Filmmusik zu Sergej Eisensteins "Alexander Newski"*, Hofheim/Taunus (Germany): Wolke-Verlag, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Byron Neil Sartain, *Two's Company. The Relationship between Eisenstein's "Alexander Nevsky" and Prokofiev's "Alexander Nevsky Cantata"* (bachelor's thesis, not published), California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, 2004.

<sup>4</sup> Sergei Prokofiev, *Alexander Nevsky*, RCA 09026 61926 2, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> [www.filmphilharmonic.com](http://www.filmphilharmonic.com)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.vanwalsum.co.uk/artists/fs.php>

<sup>7</sup> Sergei Prokofiev, *Alexander Nevsky*, ed. Frank Strobel, Hamburg (Germany): Sikorski, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Sergei Prokofiev, *Alexander Nevsky*. Complete Film Music. World Premiere Recording, Capriccio 71014 (SACD), 2004.