

WHY PROKOFIEV RETURNED TO THE USSR?

In 2003, Natalia Savkina put forward her own explanation as to why Prokofiev returned to the USSR. According to Savkina, it was Prokofiev's interest in Christian Science, in which he had become immersed in 1924, that helped him ignore various signals that might otherwise dissuade him from returning, primarily information about the Stalinist repressions. Christian Science holds that evil is an illness of the mortal mind and is essentially powerless. This theory about Prokofiev's return is rooted not in biographical materials, but rather the study of Christian Science itself. It was first presented by Natalia Savkina on February 8, 2003 at the "Prokofiev 2003" conference in Manchester, UK. In the survey of the conference Kristian Hibberd, a reviewer for the *Three Oranges Journal* wrote: "*Savkina proposed that Prokofiev's return to Soviet Russia in 1936 can be interpreted through the lens of Christian Science. This very personal hypothesis (without documentary evidence from Prokofiev) suggests that the importance Christian Science gives to the presence of evil allowed Prokofiev to face many dangers a return to Russia would bring. Equally, Prokofiev believed Christian Science was the source of his huge personal strength, perhaps giving him the courage to return to his motherland*" - *Three Oranges Journal* № 5 (2003), p. 16.

In 2005, Savkina published an article about the role of Christian Science in Prokofiev's life and work: "*Three Oranges Journal* 10 (2005), pp. 20-23.

A more broadly disseminated Russian-language version of this article was included in the 2007 conference proceedings *Scholarly Readings in honor of A.I. Kandinsky* (see "Khristianskaya nauka v zhizni S.S. Prokof'eva, in *Nauchniye chteniya pamyati A.I. Kandinskogo: materialy nauchnoy konferentsii* (Moscow State Conservatory, 2007, pp. 241-257).

The following excerpt from the 2005 publication addresses the role of Christian Science in Prokofiev's decision to return to the USSR.

From "The significance of Christian Science in Prokofiev's life and work" // *Three Oranges Journal*.
№ 10. 2005. Page 23.

"... Prokofiev was lured by the attractions of a Communist utopia. He felt the connection between the ideals of Christianity and the principles of Communism in the energy of creativity and the declarations of social equality. Thomas Graham said: "They are building in the name of an ideal, a divine ideal, although interpreted in a material sense."⁴⁸

Of course, there were dozens of other reasons to return – from unavoidable nostalgia to the rivalry with Stravinsky and Rakhmaninov, so beloved of his biographers, from the 1929 economic crisis to a longing for a place where one is loved and understood. The promises of rulers, the enthusiasm of audiences, the status of being the leading composer in the land...

However, whatever other reasons there may have been for Prokofiev to return, there was

always one **against**, which cancelled out all the others. Prokofiev knew about the Terror and the mass liquidations. The composer himself attempted to rescue his own relations from prison. Loving life and its pleasures, as he did, how could he return? Why was he not afraid?

I suggest an explanation which stems from Prokofiev's world and religious views.⁴⁹ According to Christian Science, evil is an error, a delusion of mortal reasoning. He gave much thought to this.

God created the world beautiful. "What is evil? An attempt to prove whether it is possible to create the world in some other way. It is natural that any attempt to create any other world, a world of evil or the finite, is like an instant in infinity and will be forgotten."⁵⁰ Prokofiev was not afraid, he despised any argument "against" because he wanted to believe that, in accordance with Christian Science belief, "evil is unreal". "Everything good or worthy, God made. Whatever is valueless or baneful, He did not make - hence, its unreality".⁵¹ When thoughts are directed towards good, evil vanishes. Love negates evil.

Overcoming his critical attitude to the world, Christian Science taught the composer not to be afraid. He felt himself protected by the armour of God, armed with genuine knowledge and genuine faith. When Asafiev heard from Prokofiev of Christian Science, he observed (1928): "One has to believe that evil is unreal, and that is difficult, at least at present". In an entry in the Diary (December 1932) about a conversation with Demchinsky, Prokofiev turned an argument about music into a discussion about fundamental views: "He [Demchinsky] attempts to attack courage and joy [...]. What is this calm of mine - my health, my confidence, my very identity based on? I said 'On my dependence on God'.⁵³ Any signal that warned against a return to the USSR, was defeated by his indestructible optimism and the conviction, based on Christian Science, that evil is powerless. "As long as man has a clear recognition that he is a reflection of God, the howl of the mob cannot frighten him".⁵⁴ In this Prokofiev was mistaken.

It seems to me that the principal difference between Prokofiev and Shostakovich lay in their divergent views on life. For Shostakovich the world genuinely was based in evil. Suffering from his awareness of this, the hero fights, using every scrap of strength, raising himself to heights to accomplish this act of sacrifice. Prokofiev's heroes also perish, but death, suffering and evil are merely the traces of sombre colour in the shining palette of his world view. The composer constructed his own picture of the world and this world is not based in evil. It is beautiful, good and full of light.

Whether we share Prokofiev's religious views or not and whether we agree or not with the tenets of Christian Science, one must never forget that Prokofiev was a great genius, but only Man can be a genius".