

Sergei Prokofiev and the Saxophone

Lieutenant Kijé Film and Symphonic Suite



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Beginning in the late 19th century and extending far into the 20th century, Russia, and the former Soviet Union was blessed with a rich lineage of composers. From Scriabin and Shostakovich, to Khachaturian and Glazunov, these composers are associated with the renaissance of the Russian spirit in the 20th century, and the formation of a Russian nationalistic musical idiom. Yet none achieved this quite so well, and with such worldwide acclaim, as did Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev. He was an innovator, an experimenter, and a man in search of something new, yet distinctly familiar. His scores for film and theater still rank as some of the best to this day, and the suites he derived from these works continue to be played by orchestras worldwide. Although many Russian composers used the saxophone in their works, Prokofiev created some of the saxophone's most cherished orchestral roles, including the popular suite from the film, *Lieutenant Kijé*. A careful analysis of Prokofiev's early life and musical growth provide many clues to his future tendencies, musical creativity, and inventiveness.

¹Sergei Prokofiev was born on April 23rd, 1891 in the village of Sontsovka, Ukraine, then part of the Russian Empire. His father managed a huge estate in the steppes belonging to the Sontsov family and his mother played piano, which Prokofiev said, "gave me a taste for serious music from an early childhood".² By the age of seven he had "written" mini-piano pieces, including a four-hands march. His mother encouraged this musical exploration and also gave him his first piano lessons. In January of 1902,

¹ Shilfstein, S., comp. *Sergei Prokofiev (Autobiography, Articles, and Reminiscences)*. Moscow: Foreign Languages House. Print.

² *ibid*, pg.16

Prokofiev went to Moscow and met the composer Sergei Taneyev, who suggested he study harmony with J. Pomerantsev, a former student of Taneyev. During that summer, he studied harmony, orchestration, form, and free composition with R.M. Glière, again by recommendation of Taneyev. As Prokofiev progressed in his studies he continued to work with Glière and Taneyev until his acceptance to the St. Petersburg Conservatory, showing them his early compositions, and benefiting from their criticism.

³ In 1904, at the age of 13, Prokofiev entered the St. Petersburg Conservatory. Prokofiev had been presented to Alexander Glazunov previous to his enrollment, and it was indeed Glazunov who had urged him to enroll in the Conservatory, an irony considering his later criticisms of Prokofiev's music. At the entrance exams, Prokofiev came prepared with a rather massive amount of early pieces (non-catalogued works), to which Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, the head of the examining board exclaimed, "Here is a pupil after my own heart!"⁴ His principle studies at the Conservatory consisted of orchestration with Rimsky-Korsakov, and harmony with Anatoly Lyadov. Prokofiev reminisced that Lyadov was often frustrated with his early musical experimentation, proclaiming, "I cannot understand why you bother to study with me. Go to Richard Strauss, go to Debussy"⁵

⁶Prokofiev was hardly daunted by his teacher's exhortations, and in 1908 was introduced to the sponsors for "Evenings of Modern Music", which was a gathering of the leading Russian music critics and musicians who met weekly in a small recital hall to hear the presentation of new music. Prokofiev regularly presented some of his pieces at

³ ibid

⁴ ibid, pg.22

⁵ ibid, pg. 25

⁶ ibid

these events, and was even the first musician to perform the works of Schoenberg in Russia. Critics gave mixed reviews; however, one heard in these early works an “ultra-modernist trend...much farther than the French modernists in boldness and originality.”⁷ This is perhaps the beginnings of Prokofiev’s desire to experiment with sound and harmonies, to go beyond the norm of Russian Classicism, which at the time was trying to do anything but be “Russian”, but instead imitated European classical style.

⁸Prokofiev graduated from his basic studies at the conservatory in 1909 and in the same year began to study conducting and composing with Alexander Tcherepnin, who much later wrote a work for alto saxophone and piano, *Sonatine Sportive*. Soon after, Prokofiev began to assign opus numbers to his works, and we begin to see the first printings and productions of his early pieces, such as the first Piano Concerto of 1911. In the same year, he joined another progressive music group in Moscow and in 1914 completed all requirements for graduation from the conservatory. Prokofiev identifies two major trends in his music at this time: classical and modern (mainly with harmony). This dichotomy can be heard in many of his pieces ranging from the *Classical Symphony* to works like *Alexander Nevsky* and the *Fifth Symphony*. Although Prokofiev expressed a preference for classical forms, he had an ear for new orchestration ideas, and a desire to explore sound and harmony further, a path that will lead him to his use of the saxophone.

⁹The next few years would prove troublesome for the young composer as he attempted to secure his musical language, and connect with both European and Russian audiences. Prokofiev toured often, living in London for a time, traveling to Italy, and periodically returning to his roots in Russia. On Feb. 5th, 1917 the magazine

⁷ *ibid*, pg.26

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*

Contemporary Music held a chamber evening of Prokofiev's music in Moscow.

Composers Nikolai Medtner and Sergei Rachmaninoff were there; both seemed to dislike the music. However Prokofiev notes that the Moscow public had been, "more or less favourably disposed to my music."¹⁰ This was not unusual for Prokofiev, who often was at odds with his contemporaries, yet shared a special bond with the Russian public. After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Prokofiev left Russia for a more favorable musical climate and traveled to America, arriving in New York in September, 1918.

¹¹His initial few years in America were more difficult than expected. He commented in 1919: "I would think with cold fury of all the wonderful orchestras in America that cared nothing about my music; of the critics who never tired of uttering platitudes such as 'Beethoven is a great composer'."¹² This would change for Prokofiev, who by 1945, was heralded by *TIME* Magazine as "Russia's greatest living musician" and featured on the front page of the news magazine.¹³ For the time being he concertized regularly throughout America and periodically in France, where he also became acquainted with Sergei Diaghilev and Igor Stravinsky. He continued to perform both in America and Europe throughout the 1920s, but was frustrated that even with significant premiers of his works, he had not produced any "great" works by Parisian Standards.

¹⁴Prokofiev, downtrodden and searching for a way to reconnect with the Russian people, returned to the U.S.S.R. in 1927. By December 1932, it was clear Prokofiev was interested in focusing solely on composing, for he said, "Continuous concertizing is

¹⁰ *ibid*, pg.45

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*, pg.55

¹³ "Music: Composer, Soviet Style." *TIME* 19 Nov. 1945. Print.

¹⁴ *ibid*, Shilfstein.

hardly conducive to serious creative work. I hope to begin such work as soon as I am settled in the U.S.S.R.”¹⁵ With the release of more substantial works, Prokofiev began to receive commissions from theaters in Moscow, Soviet Film organizations, and Radio organizations. The prospect of these commissions enticed Prokofiev and he accepted many with vigor. He was interested in such Soviet-themed projects as a chance to renew his connection to his homeland, as can be seen in his work, the *Cantata for the Twentieth Anniversary of October Revolution*, which uses lines from the texts of Lenin.¹⁶

¹⁷In 1933, a director from Leningrad named A. Feinzimmer from Belgoskino Studios asked Prokofiev to write music for an upcoming film entitled *Lieutenant Kijé*, based on a story by Yuri Tynanov. The story takes place in the last years of the 18th century, during the court of Tsar Paul. When a list of officers is submitted to the Tsar, a textual error by a clerk adds on the name Kijé, a fictional person. However, instead of acknowledging the mistake to the Tsar for fear of retribution, the members of the court fabricate a “life” for Kije, promote him in the military, send him into exile, marry him, and later give him a funeral for his death, all to the ignorance of the Tsar and carried out in the intense bureaucracy of the Russian court. The tone of the story and film was meant to be humorous and this would have appealed to Prokofiev’s ironic humor often expressed in his letters and writings.¹⁸

Prokofiev said, “This gave me a welcome opportunity to try my hand if not at Soviet subject matter then at music for Soviet audiences, and for the mass audience at

¹⁵ Nestyev, Israel V. *Prokofiev*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1960. Print.

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ *ibid*

¹⁸ Lee, Douglas. *Masterworks of 20th Century Music: The Modern Repertory of the Symphony Orchestra*. New York, London: Routledge, 2002. Print.

that.”¹⁹ The timing couldn’t have been better for Prokofiev, who earlier that year in a Moscow newspaper had written, “What subject matter am I looking for?...I am interested in the subject matter that would assert the positive elements. The heroic aspects of socialist construction. The new man...”²⁰ In later years, Prokofiev would comment upon the cinema, and the prospects it offered him during this time. In 1939, Prokofiev wrote to Sergei Eisenstein, the film director with whom he would later collaborate on *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*, “the cinema is the most contemporary art”.²¹ In 1940, in an article for the collection *Soviet Historical Films*, he wrote that, “The cinema is a young and very modern art that offers new and fascinating possibilities to the composer. These possibilities must be fully utilized.”²² In early 1933, after returning from a concert tour in America, Prokofiev set to work on *Lieutenant Kijé* while in Moscow. Confidently he said, “I somehow had no doubts whatever about the musical language for the film”.²³

Although Prokofiev was settled in Russia by this time, he still made periodical trips to Paris, and was especially fond of hearing concerts of new music. It is here that he was most likely exposed to saxophone in a variety of serious concert settings. He especially enjoyed Maurice Ravel, who included several saxophones in his orchestral work, *Bolero*. Prokofiev confirms his early hearings of *Bolero* in 1928, “I remember attending one of the first performances of *Bolero*...With inimitable artistry Ravel clothes his theme in a thousand different garbs”.²⁴ Undoubtedly, two of the “garbs” he heard were the saxophones, both soprano and tenor, in their prominent and striking soloistic

¹⁹ *ibid*, Shilfstein.

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*, Nestyev, 212.

²² *ibid*, Shilfstein, 114.

²³ *ibid*, 83.

²⁴ *ibid*, 108-109

roles in *Bolero*. This was most likely not the first time he heard saxophone, though. Shostakovich used a soprano saxophone in his *Age of Gold* Ballet and subsequent Orchestral Suite in 1930, and then again in 1931 for *The Golden Mountains* Suite. Despite the likelihood of Prokofiev's exposure to this, there is no word of Prokofiev's opinion of the saxophone until late in 1933, most likely after the recording of the music for the *Lieutenant Kijé* Film, which includes a tenor saxophone.

Prokofiev's use of the tenor saxophone, in both a prominent solo and ensemble role indicates his appreciation of the instrument, which was quickly reestablishing its classical role in the early 20th century. However, any reluctance he may have shown to the instrument prior to the film *Kijé* was disbanded by remarks in two letters written in late December, 1933. While spending December of 1933 in Paris, Prokofiev wrote two letters expressing his impressions of Glazunov's new *Quartet in B Major* for Four Saxophones, op. 109, which had premiered on December 14th, 1933.²⁵ Nine days later he wrote to Nikolai Miaskovsky, a Russian composer who was one of Prokofiev's few true friends, "I heard Glazunov's saxophone quartet...it was entirely obvious that with a stronger contrapuntal structure and with greater attention to color and certain other devices, a saxophone ensemble has every right to exist and can even stand up quite well in a serious piece of music".²⁶ Five days after this, on December 28th, he wrote to Boris Asafiev, a Russian critic and historian, "I did hear Glazunov's rather modest Quartet for Four Saxophones, which, surprisingly was written harmonically rather than contrapuntally (by the way, by using a contrapuntal and orchestral approach to the

²⁵ Robinson, Harlow, ed., trans. *Selected letters of Sergei Prokofiev*. Boston: Northeastern UP, 1998. Print.

²⁶ *ibid*, 309

saxophone, you can get some curious sounds!)...I'm spending most of my time at home, hurry to finish the music for Tairov's *Egyptian Nights*".²⁷ The work mentioned at the end, *Egyptian Nights*, was music for a theatre work Prokofiev was composing concurrently with *Kijé*, and which also contained a prominent tenor saxophone part in both the original work and the suite. Because of the short period of time dating from the Glazunov *Quartet*'s first performance and to the writing of both these letters, we can assume that Prokofiev was in all likely at the premier of this now standard saxophone work! His use of the saxophone in both *Lieutenant Kijé* and *Egyptian Nights* would have been established upon hearing Glazunov's work, and secured the way for his inclusion of various saxophones in many more pieces, including *Romeo and Juliet*, Suite 1 and 2, Op. 64 (1935-36), *Alexander Nevksy Cantata*, Op. 78 (1938), music for the film *The Queen of Spades*, Op.70 (1936), several incidental works, *March for Symphonic Wind Band*, Op.99 (1943-1944), and *Ode to the End of War*, Op. 105 (1945), which actually included three saxophone parts.

The music for the film *Lieutenant Kijé*, Prokofiev's first work to include saxophone, was completed in late 1933 and sent to the Leningrad Belgoskino Studios where the sound track was recorded by an orchestra under I. O. Dunayevsky, himself a budding film composer.²⁸ The original film scoring was of "16 musical segments" (slightly variable depending on the actual division).²⁹ The film successfully premiered on March 7th, 1934 to relative acclaim in Moscow.³⁰ Prokofiev finished the 5 movement

²⁷ *ibid*, Robinson, 133

²⁸ *ibid*, Nesteyev

²⁹ *ibid*, Lee, 301

³⁰ Bartig, Kevin. "Creating the Lieutenant Kizhe Suite." *Sergei Prokofiev Foundation Website*. Three Oranges Journal, 13 May 2007. Web. 1 Nov. 2009. <<http://www.sprkfv.net/journal/three13/creating.html>>.

symphonic suite by early July, 1934, and it was premiered on the radio on December 21 of that year.³¹ Prokofiev writes that both *Kijé* and *Egyptian Nights* suites “were composed on a commission from the radio.”³² The invitation for radio was by the Moscow Radio Orchestra, the All-Union Committee of Radio and Film Affairs, and Boris Gusman, director of the Bolshoi theater, and supporter of Prokofiev.³³

Although the film was a success within the confines of the U.S.S.R., the suite from *Lieutenant Kijé* is much more memorable, and is the existing form in which the music is played. Creating the suite was no easy task for Prokofiev, who notes, “Kije is a devilish job”.³⁴ In his autobiography, he explains why, “This gave me much more trouble than the music for the film itself, since I had to find the proper form, re-orchestrate the whole thing, polish it up and even combine some of the themes.”³⁵ As the original film music was for small chamber orchestra with an emphasis on winds, brass, and percussion, Prokofiev expanded upon and amplified the role of the string section, while lessening the role of the percussion section.³⁶ In addition, the entire musical score for the film lasted but 15 minutes, as much of *Kijé* involves dialogue or silence, and many of the musical numbers were repeated throughout the film.³⁷ This proved problematic when extracting a suite, which Prokofiev solved by combining several of the sections, moving others around, re-orchestrating, and expanding on many of the themes in more depth. In certain cases he cut entire numbers, as was the case with several sections featuring just percussion.

³¹ *ibid*, Nestyev

³² *ibid*, Robinson, 313

³³ *ibid*, Bartig.

³⁴ *ibid*, Nesteyev, 253

³⁵ *ibid*, Shilfstein, 83

³⁶ *ibid*, Bartig

³⁷ *ibid*, Bartig

³⁸One of the major changes from the movie score to the symphonic suite was the inclusion of a vocalist, or in one case a small ensemble of characters singing. Originally movements II and IV of the symphonic suite, the *Romance* and *Troika*, respectively, were scored for a solo vocalist supported by the orchestra. Both the words and melodies derive from several points in the film. The music for the *Romance* was changed from a solo Soprano melody sung by *Kijé's* "wife", at approximately 48:55 in the film, to a Baritone solo in the suite. The music for the *Troika* actually occurs several minutes *before* this during a scene featuring several inebriated Russian officers riding through the night in a stage coach, at approximately 45:50. This small chorus was again changed into a solo for a Baritone. Prokofiev seemed to have a penchant for this voice range, but created alternate and now standard versions of these movements without the voice. Interestingly enough, in both cases, the tenor saxophone is substituted for the voice, perhaps evidence of Prokofiev's view of an ideal tenor saxophone sound. In the *Troika* movement, Prokofiev augments the melodies played by the tenor saxophone with the addition of the basses and bassoon. In any case, the version with tenor saxophone is the standard version performed most often to this day.

Many of Prokofiev's other changes from film score to orchestra suite involve music played by the tenor saxophone. In the film, the first that we hear of *Kijé's* musical motive (there are several derivations of this throughout the film and suite) is at 11:45³⁹, where it is introduced by clarinets and flutes. However, in the suite, the *Kijé* theme is augmented rhythmically and introduced in the first movement, *The Birth of Kijé*, by the

³⁸ *Lieutenant Kizhe*. Dir. A. Feinzimmer. Belgoskino Studios, 1934. DVD.

³⁹ Film, *Kizhe*.

flute and tenor saxophone. It is then re-sounded by the bassoon, and then by the oboe and tenor saxophone together:

11

Fl. I
Sax.-Ten.
Fag. I
Tr-be I
Tr-be II
V-ni I
V-ni II
V-la
Celli
C.B.

Andante $\text{♩} = 80$

p dolce
p dolce
con sord.
p con sord.
pp
pp
pp
p

Solo
p tranquillo

40

In fact, it is the tenor saxophone, sometimes in combinations with other instruments, which is most often heard with the Kijé theme, whether in augmentation seen above or in the principle form heard first in the film.

The second movement, besides the previously mentioned vocal changes, actually takes its source material from music which occurs both before and after Kijé's wedding in the film, which is confusingly the title of movement three! The first source is the female vocal solo, occurring at 48:55⁴¹, based on "The Little Gray Dove is Cooing"⁴², which gives us the lush and soulful melody introduced by the basses, and then in solo capacity by the tenor saxophone in this movement:

⁴⁰ Prokofieff, Serge. *Lieutenant Kijé: Suite Symphonique, Op.60*. New York: Boosey and Hawkes, 1947. Print.

⁴¹ Film, *Kizhe*.

⁴² *ibid*, Lee, 301

Musical score for measures 18-21. The score is for a symphonic suite. The instruments listed are Flute I (Fl.), Saxophone Tenor (Sax-Ten.), Bassoon I (Fag. I), Violin I (V-ni I), Violin II (V-ni II), Viola (V-la), Cello (Celli), and Contrabass (C.B.). Measure 18 is marked with a box containing the number 18. The Flute I part has a 'Solo' marking and a dynamic of *mp*. The Saxophone Tenor part has a 'Solo' marking and a dynamic of *mf*. The Bassoon I part has a dynamic of *p*. The Violin I and II parts have a dynamic of *p* and a 'pizz.' (pizzicato) marking. The Viola part has a dynamic of *p* and a 'furi pizz.' marking. The Cello and Contrabass parts have a dynamic of *p* and a 'pizz.' marking. The score ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

43

This melody then gives rise to more lurching, “drunk” music which is first heard in the film following Kijé’s wedding, when his new wife and “him” are enjoying spirits and fine food. We heard this almost comical melody played in the film by plucked strings, yet in the symphonic suite the romance theme played by the solo tenor saxophone transitions directly into the Kijé “drunk” theme, again changed to a solo line for tenor saxophone:

Musical score for measures 19-21. The score is for a symphonic suite. The instruments listed are Saxophone Tenor (Sax-Ten.), Bassoon I (Fag. I), Violin I (V-ni I), Violin II (V-ni II), Viola (V-la), Cello (Celli), and Contrabass (C.B.). Measure 19 is marked with a box containing the number 19. The tempo is marked 'Allegretto (Poco meno del doppio movimento) ♩ = 104'. The Saxophone Tenor part has a dynamic of *mp*. The Bassoon I part has a dynamic of *p*. The Violin I and II parts have a dynamic of *pp* and an 'arco' marking. The Viola part has a dynamic of *p* and a 'arco div.' marking. The Cello and Contrabass parts have a dynamic of *p* and a 'div.' marking. The score ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

44

⁴³ *ibid*, Boosey and Hawkes.

The original romance theme is revisited near the end of the movement again by the tenor saxophone, perhaps depicting a more sober Kijé.

Several other solos for the tenor saxophone, however, were directly taken from the film score. Movement three of the suite, *The Wedding of Kijé*, begins with a loud and brash fanfare followed by a comical extended trumpet solo featuring several repeats of material beneath the solo re-orchestrated for the suite in various fashions. This section is followed by the Kijé leitmotiv, again sounded by the tenor saxophone, and using music taken directly from the film, at approximately 57:30⁴⁵:

The image displays a page of a musical score for the film *Kizhe*. The score is for the third movement, *The Wedding of Kijé*. It features ten staves for various instruments: Ob. I, Sax. Ten., Fag. I & II, Tr-ne III, Tuba, G.C., V-ni I, V-ni II, V-le, Celli, and C.B. The tenor saxophone part (Sax. Ten.) is the focus, marked with a 'Solo' and 'mf espress.' dynamic. A box labeled '30' is placed above the saxophone staff at the beginning of the solo. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like 'mp' and 'p'. The page number '46' is visible in the bottom right corner.

This same melody is heard again in the fifth movement, *The Burial of Kijé*, first played by the clarinets in the scoring heard in the film during the scene where Kijé is

⁴⁴ *ibid*, Boosey and Hawkes.

⁴⁵ Film, *Kizhe*.

⁴⁶ *ibid*, Boosey and Hawkes

accidentally created, and then followed by the tenor saxophone, with reworked and expanded orchestration:

The image shows a page of a musical score, numbered 47 in the bottom right corner. The score is for measures 36 through 47. The instruments listed on the left are Sax-Ten (Tenor Saxophone), G.C. (Guitar), V-ni I (Violin I), V-ni II (Violin II), V-le (Viola), Celli (Cello), and C.B. (Double Bass). The Sax-Ten part has a melodic line with a long note in measure 36. The G.C. part has a simple accompaniment. The V-ni I part has a melodic line with a 'con sord' (con sordina) instruction and a 'pp' (pianissimo) dynamic. The V-ni II part has a similar melodic line. The V-le part has a melodic line with a 'con sord unis' (con sordina unison) instruction and a 'pp' dynamic. The Celli part has a rhythmic accompaniment. The C.B. part has a rhythmic accompaniment with 'arco' and 'pizz.' (pizzicato) instructions. The score is written on a yellowed page with a red line at the bottom.

Both the film and symphonic suite of *Lieutenant Kijé* were successes in their respective mediums. Nestyev writes that “*Lieutenant Kijé and Egyptian Nights* head the list of Prokofiev’s works of the Soviet Period”.⁴⁸ Prokofiev was successfully able to recreate his “sound” and reconnect with the Russian public. The success of these works was followed by others such as the films *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible*. In fact, following several successful performances of the *Lieutenant Kijé* suite in America, Prokofiev was pursued by several Hollywood directors, but turned them down to continue to focus his efforts on his homeland.⁴⁹ The importance and impact of such a work helped to secure the saxophone’s place in Russian music. And despite a Soviet ban on saxophone in 1949, orchestral works continued to be written which included saxophone, such as *Gayane Ballet* by Khachaturian, *The Gadfly Suite* by Shostakovich,

⁴⁷ *ibid*, Boosey and Hawkes

⁴⁸ *ibid*, Nestyev, 253

⁴⁹ *ibid*, Lee, 302

and *Symphonic Dances* by Rachmaninov. Although it would not be until the mid 1970s before the first “classical” saxophone professor was hired at the Moscow Conservatory, it is compelling to think of the confidence these composers held in the saxophone as a unique voice.

As saxophonists, the symphonic suite *Lieutenant Kijé* is a work of contemporary and historical importance. Prokofiev effectively used the saxophone in the film, and in an expanded role in the symphonic suite. The tenor saxophone embodies through its solos the birth, life, and death of Kijé and is in that sense, the central character to the suite. In two cases, the tenor saxophone was substituted for a baritone voice, which is evidence of the quality of sound to be brought to this work. In fact, the saxophone is the only instrument in the suite to perform in almost a completely solo capacity. Given this special role, it is a work to be embraced and understood by any concert saxophonist. Sergei Prokofiev was a man in search of something contemporary and powerful that resounded with the spirit of the Russian populace. *Lieutenant Kijé* effectively reestablished Prokofiev’s Russian roots, his connection to the populace, and secured the way for his great works to come.

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