

Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953): Overture to *War and Peace* (1941-1952)

In 1941, when Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, Prokofiev found himself in a state of shock. He recalled: "During this period an idea which had been germinating in my mind to write an opera on Tolstoy's *War and Peace* took decisive shape. Somehow those pages recounting the Russian people's struggle against Napoleon's hordes in 1812 and the expulsion of the French armies from Russian soil seemed especially close. It was clear that precisely those pages should lie at the basis of the opera." Spurred on the timeliness of the composition, Prokofiev worked feverishly to complete a draft, which was finished just one year later. Subsequently, however, politics, personal health, and the logistics of staging such an enormous work created nearly insurmountable obstacles. After numerous drafts, in 1947, the opera finally received a dress rehearsal. Health issues prevented Prokofiev from attending, but representatives from Stalin's Committee on Art Affairs and the Union of Soviet Composers were in the hall listening intently. Without their approval, a public performance of the work would be impossible. They objected to the opera's representation and staging of historical events and also to portions of the music itself, which some deemed "formalist"—too complex to appeal to the common people. It was death by committee, so to speak. Prokofiev was desperate to see the work produced, and made numerous suggested revisions and cuts, but he unfortunately never lived to hear a fully staged performance. Ironically, Stalin died on the same day as Prokofiev, March 5, 1953. Just two months later, the opera finally had its first public premiere. Prokofiev's own words serve as a program for the idealism of the overture: "in composing *War and Peace* I strove to write a work imbued with principle, one needed by our people."