

Chailly's Prokofiev: Fourth Symphony and Alexander Nevsky

Wednesday, March 4, 2026 · 20:15 · Concertgebouw
Riccardo Chailly, conductor · Marie-Nicole Lemieux, contralto · Netherlands
Radio Choir, choir · Chorus of Dutch National Opera, choir

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Symphony No. 4 in C major, Op. 112 (1947 version)</i>	37'
2	PROKOFIEV 1891–1953 <i>Alexander Nevsky, Op. 78 (cantata)</i>	40'
TOTAL MUSIC		77'

Sergei Prokofiev

1891–1953

Symphony No. 4 in C major, Op. 112 (1947 version)

THE COMPOSER

Sergei Prokofiev was born in 1891 in Sontsivka, then part of the Russian Empire (now Ukraine), and was admitted to the St. Petersburg Conservatory in 1904, several years younger than most of his classmates. By his teens he was already a fearsome pianist and an enfant terrible of Russian modernism, scandalising audiences with the percussive dissonance of his early works.

In 1918, Prokofiev left Russia with official Soviet permission and spent nearly two decades in the West, first in the United States, then mostly in Paris, composing operas, ballets, symphonies, and concertos that earned him a place among the leading modernists of his generation. After several years of shuttling between Paris and Moscow, he settled permanently in the Soviet Union in 1936. The remaining years of his life were marked by official denunciation in 1948, deteriorating health, and personal tragedy. He died on 5 March 1953, the same day as Stalin. Soviet newspapers, consumed by the dictator's death, barely noted his passing.

ABOUT THE WORK

Prokofiev's Fourth Symphony has an unusual double life. He first wrote it in 1929–30, drawing on music he had composed for the ballet *The Prodigal Son* for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; that original version (Op. 47), premiered in Boston in 1930, was compact (about twenty-

37 minutes

two minutes) and made little impression. Nearly two decades later, in 1947, fresh from the triumph of his heroic, broadly-spanned Fifth Symphony, he returned to the neglected Fourth and reworked it so thoroughly, expanding it to some thirty-seven minutes and deepening and grandly amplifying its material, that he gave it a new opus number, 112, considering it effectively a new work. It is this larger, more imposing 1947 version that we hear tonight.

The symphony's fortunes did not immediately improve. In early 1948, just after Prokofiev completed the revision, the notorious Zhdanov decree denounced him and other leading Soviet composers for 'formalism,' and much of his music was banned from the concert hall. The revised Fourth was not performed in the Soviet Union until 1957, after the composer's death. Even today it is rarely played, which makes a chance to hear it, in the hands of a great Prokofiev conductor, all the more valuable. Beneath its ballet origins lie some of the composer's most attractive lyrical ideas, now clothed in the grand, heroic manner of his maturity.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Keep in mind the symphony's roots in *The Prodigal Son*: much of its melodic material has the vivid, characterful quality of ballet music: themes that seem to depict scenes and gestures. Listen for Prokofiev's unmistakable fingerprints throughout: the bittersweet, wide-leaping lyrical melodies, the biting wit, the propulsive 'motoric' rhythms, and the brilliant, slightly acid orchestration.

The four movements follow a broadly classical plan, but on the expanded 1947 scale they feel grander and more heroic than the lithe original. Listen for the warm, expansive lyricism of the slow music (drawn from the ballet's most tender pages), for the energetic outer movements with their driving momentum, and for the way Prokofiev builds the finale toward a big, affirmative close, the kind of broad, public ending he had perfected in the Fifth Symphony. It is a rare chance to get to know an unjustly neglected work by a great symphonist.

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ABOUT THE WORK

Alexander Nevsky is one of the supreme examples of music written for film that has triumphantly outlived the screen. In 1938 Prokofiev collaborated with the great director Sergei Eisenstein on a patriotic historical epic about the thirteenth-century Russian prince Alexander Nevsky, who repelled an invasion of Teutonic Knights, a story whose anti-German message was unmistakable on the eve of the Second World War. The collaboration between the two men, who greatly admired each other, was extraordinarily close, and the result is one of the landmarks of film history. The following year, in 1939, Prokofiev reshaped the score into a concert cantata for contralto, chorus and orchestra, condensing the film's twenty-seven cues into seven movements, and it has been a repertoire staple ever since. He conducted the premiere in Moscow on 17 May 1939.

The cantata is a sequence of vivid, cinematic tableaux, and it needs no film to thrill: Prokofiev's gift for atmosphere, for grinding dissonance and blazing diatonic splendour, makes the images leap off the stage. Its centrepiece is the colossal 'Battle on the Ice,' depicting the climactic clash on the frozen Lake Peipus, and its emotional heart is 'The Field of the Dead,' a haunting lament for solo contralto: a woman searching the battlefield for her beloved. Around them the chorus is by turns menacing (the Crusaders' Latin chant), exhorting ('Arise, ye Russian people') and finally jubilant. It is mass spectacle and intimate grief in a single, gripping span.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Follow the seven scenes. The cantata opens with a desolate orchestral evocation of **‘Russia under the Mongolian Yoke’**: bleak, frozen, empty. The chorus then enters with the noble **‘Song about Alexander Nevsky,’** recalling an earlier Russian victory. Listen, in **‘The Crusaders in Pskov,’** for the chilling, mechanical Latin chant of the Teutonic Knights, brassy, brutal and inhuman, set against the warm, suffering music of the Russian people; and in **‘Arise, Ye Russian People’** for the rousing, bell-clanging call to arms.

The great central movement is **‘The Battle on the Ice’**: a long, astonishing build from icy stillness to a furious, hammering clash between the Knights’ chant and the Russians’ themes, the orchestra depicting cavalry charges, cracking ice and chaos, one of the most exciting battle-pieces in all music. After the storm comes the cantata’s most moving page, **‘The Field of the Dead,’** where the solo contralto sings a heartbreaking lament over the fallen. Finally, **‘Alexander’s Entry into Pskov’** brings blazing, bell-crowned rejoicing, the chorus and orchestra united in triumphant celebration of the victory.

Tonight's artists

Marie-Nicole Lemieux *contralto*

Alexander Nevsky gives its solo singer just one movement, but what a movement: 'The Field of the Dead,' a desolate lament sung by a woman walking the frozen battlefield in search of her beloved among the slain. It is the emotional centre of the whole cantata, and it calls for exactly the kind of deep, dark, sorrow-laden voice that is Marie-Nicole Lemieux's glory. A genuine contralto of international stature, she can give this brief solo its full weight of grief, the human heart amid the mass spectacle of battle. (She stepped in here for the originally announced soloist, Ekaterina Semenchuk.)

Marie-Nicole Lemieux, born in Dolbeau-Mistassini, Quebec, in 1975, is one of the world's leading contraltos, a true contralto with the rich, dark, resonant low voice that is among the rarest in opera. She announced herself internationally in 2000 as the first Canadian to win first prize at the Queen Elisabeth Competition in Brussels, and has since sung in leading opera houses and festivals, in a repertoire spanning Handel and Vivaldi, French opera, Verdi and the great concert works. Admired for the warmth and dramatic depth of her singing as well as for her vivid stage presence, she was appointed a member of the Order of Canada in 2015. Her dusky, expressive instrument is ideally suited to the grieving contralto solo at the heart of Alexander Nevsky.

Netherlands Radio Choir *choir*

Prokofiev's cantata demands a large, powerful chorus capable of everything from the menacing Latin chant of the Crusaders to the blazing patriotic jubilation of the finale. The Netherlands Radio Choir, the country's foremost professional concert choir, supplies exactly that weight and brilliance, joining with the Chorus of Dutch National Opera to field the massed voices Alexander Nevsky needs.

The Netherlands Radio Choir (Groot Omroepkoor) is the only professional choir in the Netherlands devoted to the great choral-symphonic repertoire; it was founded shortly after the Second World War and is based in Hilversum. A regular partner of the Dutch radio orchestras and of visiting ensembles, it is celebrated for the power, precision and tonal richness it brings to the great choral-orchestral repertoire, from oratorio and opera to large-scale twentieth-century works: exactly the forces needed for the massed choruses of Alexander Nevsky.

Chorus of Dutch National Opera *choir*

Combining an opera chorus with a concert choir gives Alexander Nevsky both the dramatic theatricality and the sheer mass of sound it thrives on. The Chorus of Dutch National Opera brings its operatic intensity and rich, trained sound to the partnership, helping conjure both the brutal Teutonic Knights and the heroic Russian people.

The Chorus of Dutch National Opera (Koor van De Nationale Opera), based at the opera house in Amsterdam, is the company's own professional chorus of some sixty singers, known for its dramatic commitment and its polished, full-bodied sound across a vast operatic repertoire. Here it joins the Netherlands Radio Choir to supply the massed forces required by Prokofiev's Alexander Nevsky.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Lina and Serge: The Love and Wars of Lina Prokofiev**

Simon Morrison, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt 2013

The story of Prokofiev's first wife, which follows the family's move to Soviet Moscow in the years of Alexander Nevsky.

ACCESSIBLE **Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography**

Harlow Robinson, Northeastern University Press 2002

A full, readable life of Prokofiev, from the Fourth Symphony's origins in the ballet The Prodigal Son to his work with Eisenstein on Alexander Nevsky.

DEEPER **The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years**

Simon Morrison, Oxford University Press 2010

A study of Prokofiev's Soviet years based on archival research, covering both Alexander Nevsky and the 1947 revision of the Fourth Symphony.

SOURCES

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2. Riccardo Chailly, conductor emeritus, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouwworkest.nl/en/orchestra/conductors/riccardo-chailly/>
3. Riccardo Chailly, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Riccardo_Chailly
4. Symphony No. 4 (Prokofiev), Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_\(Prokofiev\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Symphony_No._4_(Prokofiev))
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9. De Nationale Opera, Wikipedia (Dutch). https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Nationale_Opera

Sergei Prokofiev · Alexander Nevsky, Op. 78 (cantata)

10. Lina and Serge: The Love and Wars of Lina Prokofiev, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780547391311>
11. Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781555535179>
12. The People's Artist: Prokofiev's Soviet Years, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199753482>



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