

Listen4 listening guides

A brief guide to listening to Prokofiev's Symphony No. 1 in D major, "Classical"

This outline serves as a listening guide, or "road map," through a work being performed today. The intention is to help you follow along and enjoy it in more depth. We welcome you to email us with your reactions at announcements@aspennmusic.org. Now ... let the music begin!

Sergei Prokofiev composed his first symphony, which he nicknamed "Classical," in 1917, in the midst of World War I and the same year as the Russian Revolution. One might expect music of turbulence and angst, but instead Prokofiev serves up a sparkling homage to the eighteenth-century Classical Era of Haydn.

A symphony in miniature, the music follows the Classical Era's tidy four-movement format of fast, slow, dance movement, and brisk finale. But Prokofiev embellishes tradition with modern touches—witty imagination, colorful harmonies, and invigorating rhythm. The result is pure orchestral joy.

1

First movement: Quick, lively (In Italian: *Allegro*)

From the first forte (loud) note and rapid upward violin scale, the pace of this movement never flags. The writing here is very transparent so each of the woodwind and brass voices are heard clearly when it's their moment to shine. The opening of the work sweeps the listener into the eighteenth century with its mannered and orderly writing—all the more interesting considering that by this time in his career, Prokofiev had already established himself as something of a musical rebel. (One story goes that during the booing of his Second Piano Concerto, this *enfant terrible* cheekily sat down and played an encore.)

2

Second movement: Moderately slow (In Italian: *Larghetto*)

This movement opens exuding a dignified serenity, with the lower strings establishing a simple rhythm while the violin section plays the first soaring theme. This section playing—high and in unison—is extremely difficult and is a test of any violin section. Listen as the solo flute joins. As the other members of the wind section are added, the volume grows, but the short notes at the bottom of the orchestra keep things moving. The movement ends quietly with a restatement of the opening theme in the strings.

3

Third movement: Quick, not too fast (In Italian: *Gavotte; Non troppo allegro*)

A gavotte is a French dance with a peasant origin, and this movement's friendly, ponderous mood could easily be used to musically describe a Breughel painting (Breughel lived in the sixteenth century and was famous for his peasant scenes). This brief gem-like movement follows the format of the minuet form: the first section is presented, followed by the second section, with new musical ideas stated; then there is a return to the first section. This is sometimes called "A-B-A" form. Some may recognize this music since Prokofiev expanded it for use in his famous ballet score *Romeo and Juliet*.

4

Fourth movement: Very brisk, fast (In Italian: *Finale: Molto vivace*)

Sharp exclamations in the violins and winds punctuate the opening of this perpetual motion movement. Listen for: the virtuosic playing required by the flutes to play an exceptionally fast section that is repeated several times; the strings alternating lightning fast runs with pizzicato playing (plucking); and the woodwinds and brass jumping out with pointed notes to surprise the listener. This movement is like looking into the insides of a Swiss watch—all gears turning at once to create an extremely clever and humorous bit of music.

—Betsy Furth