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Stalin the Powerful
Prokofiev, Eisenstein and *Ivan the Terrible*
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Sergei Eisenstein called it his “suicide note.” Part I won the coveted Stalin Prize, yet Part II was banned from distribution, and Part III was virtually destroyed by Soviet officials. Over 60 years later, *Ivan the Terrible* remains Eisenstein’s most controversial film and, inexplicably, Sergei Prokofiev’s least-known major film score.

Ivan was a risky venture to say the least. Though composer and director had succeeded in winning Joseph Stalin’s approval with their first collaboration, *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), Prokofiev’s self-imposed 18-year exile and Eisenstein’s constant scrutiny by Soviet officials made them easy targets. And the idea of filming a historical costume drama detailing the bloody reign of Tsar Ivan IV (1530-1584) that bore striking similarities to the current Soviet leader could be construed as foolish at best.

But ever mindful of using film as a propaganda tool, Stalin approved of *Ivan the Terrible*, which he viewed as a project that glorified the richness of Russian culture and, as the late film music historian/orchestrator Christopher Palmer pointed out, portrayed “an autocrat whose vision of a great united Russia justified ruthlessness and brutality.” Eisenstein wrote the screenplay quickly, in just four months, but after Hitler invaded Russia in June 1941, he had to move his operations from Moscow to Alma-Ata, the capital of present-day Kazakhstan. Prokofiev joined him in June 1942 to begin work on

the score.

Prokofiev was “always stimulated” working with Eisenstein and considered him “not only a brilliant filmmaker, but also a very sensitive musician.” As the two went through the screenplay together, Eisenstein explained “in vivid detail what music he had in mind....[illustrating] every scene from the film with his own drawings.” Prokofiev said that without this visual reference, he “could never catch all the nuances of Eisenstein’s conception.” Working with a stopwatch, Prokofiev’s “mercilessly exact fingers move with nervous spasms that resemble a Morse code apparatus,” Eisenstein wrote in his memoirs. Promised “great freedom in all areas,” Prokofiev composed most of the score before shooting began in April 1943, and continued working on it sporadically until 1946. *Variety* called the result “a powerful score.”

Ballet, Opera or Mutant Kabuki Show?

Probably inspired by directing a controversial 1940 production of Wagner’s *Die Walküre*, Eisenstein’s approach toward *Ivan the Terrible* has often been labeled “operatic.” In a 1993 article in the *Village Voice*, J. Hobeman commented: “A majestic synthesis, elaborately scored by Sergei Prokofiev, *Ivan* seems as much a ballet or an opera (or a mutant kabuki show) as a movie. ... Using all the resources of *mise-en-scène* (shadow play, museum-quality props, outlandish costumes), cutting on music or choreographed gesture, Eisenstein’s method approaches animation.” A 1981 *New York Times* review said, “Prokofiev’s music...is weighted with insistent significance, like the limited but exaggerated masque gestures and expressions found in Eisenstein’s cinematic faces.” In addition to his incidental music, Prokofiev’s score bears its own operatic stamp, featuring sung choruses, chants and hymns drawn from the Russian Orthodox liturgy, and songs based on Russian folk music.



Terrible Twosome: Prokofiev and Eisenstein.

Ivan’s Themes

The incidental music consists of a number of what Christopher Palmer labeled “thematic episodes...short episodes not designed for any specific scene but based on a specific theme...which the director was free to use throughout the film and where he saw fit.” The most prominent of these episodes, Ivan’s theme, is a Wagnerian four-phrase that

represents three different aspects of the character. Eisenstein wanted the theme to bear the same characteristics as the beginning of *Die Walküre*—“storm, thunder, rain”—and the first version of Ivan’s theme does just that. The melody in the low brass surges forward on the black clouds of the overture in both parts, and conveys Eisenstein’s theme of the film: “power.” Two later uses underscore the war cry “To Kazan!” and the rush of the crowd as Ivan stands over Anastasia’s coffin.

The second version of Ivan’s theme is heard in quieter moments when Ivan’s power is in check. Played in the strings and pizzicato harp, the theme, first heard during the wedding scene, provides an inspirational backdrop prior to the battle at Kazan as Ivan appears outside his tent. The last statement occurs in the second flashback of *Part II*, providing an ironic comment on the young Ivan’s youth upon the throne.

Eisenstein closes *Part I* in one of the most visually stunning (and justly famous) sequences in the entire film. The third version of Ivan’s theme accompanies a shot of Ivan’s profile set against a snaking line of Muscovites in the Russian snow pleading with him to come back to Moscow. The grandiose theme is performed in the low brass, accented by fanfares in the trumpets and harp glissandi. This final version serves the same function in both finales, when the screenplay none too subtly issues proclamations of Russian unity.



The Oprichniki

Two motifs are used in relation to the Oprichniki, Ivan’s bodyguards and the forerunners of Stalin’s Secret Police. The first is a humming chorus that occurs in *Part I* with the appearance of this “iron ring” of devoted young men “who have sprung from the people and who owe [Ivan] everything...[men] who will deny father and mother to serve only the Tsar.” This music eventually becomes the basis for the procession to the cathedral in *Part II*, in which the wordless chorus is accompanied by ponderous “heartbeats” in the low strings, representing the heavy tread of Prince Vladimir unwittingly leading himself to his own assassination. The theme later serves as the

Oprichniki oath: “I swear before God to accomplish in Russia my royal mission, to purge the Motherland of her savage enemies, to shed with my own hands the blood of the guilty, without mercy, either to myself or others.” Prokofiev and Eisenstein originally hoped the song would form part of the finale of *Part I*, but only a brief portion of it is heard following Efrosinia’s defeat at the climax of *Part II*. The second motif is a vigorous tune that first accompanies the brief transition scene in *Part II* as the Oprichniki ride back to Moscow, and later becomes part of the chaotic dance music in the blood-red saturated banquet scene.

Another thematic episode is a desperate motif for clarinet, played over frantic strings as Ivan explains the harsh penalties for anyone who opposes the Tsar. The theme has its genesis in what was to be the Prologue to *Part I*, involving the death of young Ivan’s mother at the hands of the boyars, the aristocracy who shared power with the Tsar. However, Stalin deemed the sequence inappropriate for the beginning of the film and Eisenstein was forced to turn it into a flashback sequence in *Part II*. The theme’s third appearance underscores Malyuta’s executions of the Kolychev family boyars.

Though the thematic episodes play a large role in the score, much of Prokofiev’s incidental music follows along more traditional scoring lines, with cues attached to single scenes. With Moscow in flames, steady low strings and snare drum underscore a belching low brass theme as the rioters invade the palace. A sinister melody for oboe and clarinet duet, tom-toms and pizzicato strings underscores a volley of arrows as the Tartars slaughter their own people rather than have them taken prisoner. A bustling ostinato spurs Ivan’s troops into battle as bombs explode, fireballs whoosh through the air, and Kazan falls.

Prokofiev brings the strings to the fore in scenes of desperation and treachery. A chromatic, pleading melody accompanies a dying Ivan’s appeals to the boyars to recognize his infant son as the legitimate heir to the throne. Looking for a way to destroy Ivan, Efrosinia poisons Anastasia to the sounds of stealthy, *Psycho*-like strings. In *Part II*’s flashback scene, a chromatic 17-note phrase, underscored by furious triplets in the low violins and belching brass, accompanies young Ivan’s first flicker of power as he sentences Shiusky to his death.

Amongst all this musical treachery, Prokofiev inserts a surprising major-key polonaise during the scene at the Polish court in *Part II*. Originally written for a dramatic stage production of Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov*, the performance never took place, as the director, Vsevolod Meyerhold, was arrested and executed. (Meyerhold’s production was finally given its world premiere this past April at Princeton University, accompanied by Prokofiev’s score.)

Operatic Inventions

In addition to the “Oath of the Oprichniki,” Prokofiev employed other choruses and songs that contribute to the score’s “operatic” feeling. The overture to *Part I* contains the “Black Cloud” chorus, which sets up the story to come: “A black cloud is forming/A bloody dawn approaching/The boyars have hatched a treacherous plot/Against the Tsar’s authority/Which they are now unleashing.” The Kazan sequence contains a beautiful choral melody underscoring snaking lines of anonymous soldiers dropping coins on a plate in order for the dead to be counted following the battle. Prokofiev reused the tune in his opera *War and Peace*, and it later provided (almost note-for-note) the basis for one of James Horner’s themes in the 1989 film *Glory*. A martial battle song accompanies the artillerymen digging tunnels for gunpowder underneath the castle walls.

During the wedding sequence, Prokofiev incorporated two songs that come from the traditional Russian wedding: “Song of Praise” greeted the bridegroom and “The Swan” greeted the bride. In contrast, the words of “The Song of the Beaver” are taken from a collection of authentic folk texts. The song, a chilling lullaby Efrosinia sings to Vladimir about her plans to install him as Tsar once Ivan is killed, is heard in its entirety prior to the banquet sequence in *Part II*. The music is tied primarily to Efrosinia’s view of the song’s connotations (“They want to kill the beaver, and to skin him/To make a royal mantle trimmed with beaver/To attire Tsar Vladimir”). The song’s final appearance accompanies Efrosinia’s mad wailings over the body of her son, whom she unwittingly helped to assassinate. Finally, the “Song of the Oprichniki” is a diabolical Asian pantomime sung during the banquet sequence (“We have been to visit the boyars in the courts!/Our axes have been busy among the boyars!”).



Working Terribly Hard: Director Sergei Eisenstein and an early concept drawing of *Ivan the Terrible*.

From the very beginning, Prokofiev and Eisenstein believed that the inclusion of the Russian Orthodox liturgy was just as important as Prokofiev’s music. *Part I* opens with Ivan’s coronation and is scored entirely with Prokofiev’s adaptations of authentic

Russian Orthodox music. A quiet *Kyrie Eleison* and a 19th-century monastic song, “Sofrony’s Cherubic Song,” underscore the archdeacon’s exclamations over the newly crowned Tsar. A bass solo sings, “May the Lord save him and keep him,” and as coins rain upon Ivan’s head, the chorus shouts, [“Long life to the Tsar!”](#)

Actual recordings of liturgical music were incorporated into three scenes without being notated in the score. The first accompanies the last sacraments over Ivan’s dying body, and later, three liturgical chants from the Orthodox requiem service underscore the scene at Anastasia’s coffin. The most affecting chants sing a mourn over the bodies of the slaughtered Kolychev boyars. “Do Not Weep for Me, Mother” grieves for the innocent victims, while the hymn “You Were Told, Judas” compares Ivan to Judas: “It were better for you, traitor/that you had not been born,/betrayed of the Son of God.”

In retaliation for his family’s slaughter, Kolychev plans to “crush” Ivan “with the weight of the church” through a performance of the Furnace Play, an ancient Russian liturgical drama performed in churches before Christmas in the week of the Holy Fathers. The story originally came from the Bible and tells of the miraculous deliverance of three young men who had been cast into a fiery furnace by an ungodly king for refusing to worship idols. But Eisenstein wrote a new text, which emphasized the dramatic relevance of the subject, and Prokofiev set it to music. However, Prokofiev’s haunting “Song of the Boys” was replaced by “Wondrous Is God,” music reminiscent of traditional liturgical chant, which may have been improvised by the choir.

Given the poor recording equipment available, cues that fade and drop out, questionable repetitions and crosscutting with other cues, Prokofiev’s score is not heard to its full advantage in the film. In the mid-1990’s, orchestras began to program Prokofiev’s score performed live with the film, a practice that had begun with *Alexander Nevsky* a few years earlier. However, because of the unorthodox presentation of much of the music in the film, concert performances of *Ivan the Terrible* have not been as successful as those for *Nevsky*.



Changing Their *Terrible* Tune: Josef Stalin (right) and his administration were big fans of Prokofiev's work with Eisenstein on *Ivan*, Part 1. Not so the rest of the series.

“Anti-historical and Anti-artistic”

Ivan the Terrible, Part I premiered in Moscow in December 1944 to great critical acclaim. And in January 1946, Eisenstein and Prokofiev received the Stalin Prize, awarded annually in the fields of science, mathematics, literature, arts and architecture, to honor achievements that either advanced the Soviet Union or the cause of socialism. But when it came to *Part II*, Eisenstein had made little effort to conceal the connection between Ivan's “Man of Iron” and Stalin's “Man of Steel,” and the Soviet government took notice.

In July 1946, the Department of Agitation and Propaganda of the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued *Culture and Life*, a new bi-weekly newspaper “to develop Bolshevik criticism of defects in different branches of the economy and cultural life.” Warning that every film must be “ideological and a highly artistic production,” the paper outlined the 13 themes around which Soviet producers could develop films, including “the work of Soviet intellectuals and scientists...engineers who increase the technical efficiency of the Soviet Union....mother heroines, that is, women who have reared 10 children...[and] Georgian fruit farms.”

Eisenstein was one of the first artists to come under attack. Because Ivan was not shown “as a progressive statesman, but as a maniac and like a scoundrel who behaves in a crazy manner,” the paper called *Part II* “anti-historical and anti-artistic.” Eisenstein had “betrayed his ignorance of historical fact by showing...[the oprichniki] as a degenerate band rather like the Ku Klux Klan, and Ivan the Terrible himself, who was a man of strong will and character, as weak and indecisive, somewhat like Hamlet.”

Part II was banned from distribution, and the ban stayed in effect until 1958, when the film was finally shown publicly, after Eisenstein, Prokofiev and Stalin were dead. In addition, the Soviet government “mislaid” the four reels of *Part III*, which Eisenstein

reputedly finished before his death, though luckily five minutes of footage have survived. In all probability, Prokofiev composed music for *Part III*. If so, it has not yet been found, except perhaps as elements in later concert works.

No doubt owing to his troubles with the Soviet government, Eisenstein suffered a heart attack. Though he recovered and petitioned Stalin to be allowed to revise *Part II* as the bureaucracy wanted, he was dismissed. In fact, Eisenstein was too weak to resume shooting, and he died in 1948. “With the death of Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein,” said Prokofiev, “I consider my cinematographic work to have come to an end once and for all.” True to his word, *Ivan the Terrible* was Prokofiev’s final film score.



Terrible Propaganda: A Russian poster advertising the movie’s release.

While working on the score, Prokofiev had toyed with the idea of writing an opera about Ivan, which, unfortunately never materialized. Following Eisenstein’s death, Prokofiev turned down offers of writing a concert work based on the score, as he had with his first film score, *Lieutenant Kijé* (1934), and *Alexander Nevsky*. However, in 1962, nine years after the composer’s death, Abram Stasevich, the conductor on the original soundtrack, arranged the score into an oratorio. While the piece provides the listener with a fair introduction to Prokofiev’s score, Stasevich made many changes to the music, including the questionable addition of a speaker reciting Russian text from the films. The oratorio premiered in 1968, with Stasevich conducting the St. Louis Orchestra. Later versions of the score include another oratorio compiled by British conductor Michael Lankester (with the Russian texts rendered in English), a concert scenario arranged by Christopher

Palmer, and a ballet choreographed by Yuri Grigorovich. None of these have become staples in the concert repertoire like Prokofiev's own arrangements of *Kijé* and *Nevsky*.

* * *

Ivan the Terrible is now recognized as a classic of Russian cinema. Though modern audiences may find the broad gestures of the actors off-putting, the film is a visually stunning portrait of Ivan's descent into paranoia and madness, even without *Part III* to complete Eisenstein's vision. And certainly, Prokofiev's score deserves a higher place in his canon.

In an essay titled "P-R-K-F-V", Eisenstein wrote of Prokofiev's style, so spare that he signed his name without vowels: "The Prokofiev of our time is a man of the screen...not only one of the greatest composers of our time, but also, in my opinion, the most wonderful film composer." Upon accepting the job scoring *Ivan the Terrible*, Prokofiev reassured Eisenstein, "I continue to regard the cinema as the most contemporary art. Precisely because of that newness, though we still haven't learned to appreciate its various components. Most people still consider the music as a little ditty off to the side, undeserving of special attention."

To borrow a line from Arthur Miller, "attention must be paid."

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