

Prokofiev's *Alexander Nevsky* – a survey of the discography

by Ralph Moore

During his last trip abroad in 1938, Prokofiev visited various Hollywood film studios, even going to Walt Disney's cartoon laboratories and turning down a lucrative and very tempting offer to collaborate with them in composing the music for a film; imagine how different *Fantasia* (1940) might have been had he accepted. However, he turned what he had learned in the United States about cinematographic techniques to good use in his contribution to Sergei Eisenstein's film *Alexander Nevsky* (1938), which was essentially Soviet propaganda but still a cinematic masterpiece and instrumental in Prokofiev composing one of the few examples of film music which has been elevated to classic status and now forms part of the standard concert repertoire. It may be heard in two distinct and different guises: as the music we hear in the film track or arranged by the composer the following year as a cantata with the original 27 film score cues rewritten and condensed into seven movements and some fifteen minutes of music discarded – as were most of the inevitable church bells which always feature so prominently in Russian films of the period. That exercise, perhaps occasioned by Prokofiev's reluctance to see his music side-lined as a result of the sudden and politic withdrawal of the film following the signing of the German- Soviet non-aggression pact, cost him no little effort; as he remarked, "Sometimes it is easier to write a whole new piece than solder one together." I am primarily concerned here with recordings of that Op. 78, which is how the work is usually encountered in concert and recordings, performed by mezzo-soprano, chorus and orchestra and I have confined my survey to stereo and digital recordings, as the music demands that advantage.

For all its merits, the music on the film's original soundtrack was poorly performed and recorded, with a very limited frequency range and deliberate microphone shatter. There are, however, two recordings of reconstructions of the complete film music in first-rate sound: the first is the version made by American orchestrator William Brohn and recorded by Temirkanov in 1995 and the second is that made by German conductor Frank Strobel, released on Capriccio in 2003. Whereas Brohn had to reconstruct the score by ear, using the orchestration of the cantata as a model, Strobel had the advantage of access to Prokofiev's manuscripts which subsequently became available and was thus able to claim greater authenticity, but in purely musical terms, Brohn's version is more satisfying as it employs the same full orchestra as the cantata, whereas Strobel uses the thinner orchestration of the original, which might be more suitable as accompaniment to the visuals but is less appropriate in the concert hall, where the impact of a big orchestra including brass a-plenty, an organ and a huge bank of percussion instruments, is essential. Both recordings suffer from the inevitably fragmentary nature of the score in its original form as opposed to the unity of the more cohesive and streamlined cantata arrangement.

The subject matter is highly patriotic and was indeed designed as a morale booster for Russians going to war against Nazi Germany: the story is of how the 13th Century national hero Prince Alexander of Novgorod first defeated the Swedes in battle by the river Neva (hence his honorific sobriquet "Nevsky" – "of Neva") in 1240, then two years later was again summoned to the defence of Mother Russia, engaging with the Livonian crusader knights invading the Novgorod Republic, defeating them in battle on the frozen Lake Chud and recapturing the city of Pskov. The significance of repelling Teutonic invaders would not have been lost on Stalin's populace; Nevsky was revered by Peter the Great and even canonised by the Orthodox Church.

Prokofiev certainly provides fervour and excitement in his epic sonic depiction of the "The Battle on the Ice" but for me the highpoint and emotional centre of the score is always the deeply moving and melancholy strophic lament for the young woman searching for her slain lover in "The Field of the Dead". There are, however, plenty of other striking effects, not least the ominous pulsing of the music depicting the dawn of the day of the great battle – surely one of the most successful pieces of mood-music in the classical canon. Unlike the *Lieutenant Kijé* concert suite, which is more thematic and generalised in mood, the order of events in *Alexander Nevsky* specifically illustrates and adheres to those in Eisenstein's film. The invading army is portrayed by dissonances and heavy, chromatic brass,

and much of the music equates to sound effects, such as in the rhythmical depiction of the charging cavalry or the clash of arms. We are more accustomed to considering programmatic, pictorial or narrative works such *The Four Seasons*, the *Pastoral Symphony*, *Ein Alpensinfonie* and *L'apprenti sorcier* as masterpieces; that phenomenon is much rarer among film scores but I consider *Alexander Nevsky* to be an example of how cinematic "programme music" can be of the highest quality. In addition to a soloist with a trenchant lower register it also requires a first-rate choir which can sustain power and pitch throughout five of the seven movements.

The song texts were mostly written by the poet Vladimir Lugovskoy but Prokofiev himself apparently provided the cryptic Latin gibberish intoned by the crusaders "Peregrinus expectavi, pedes meos in cymbalis" ("A pilgrim I waited, my feet in cymbals"), concocted from words lifted from the Psalms and probably intended as a private joke aimed at Stravinsky. In any case, their monotonous chant serves to dehumanise the Catholic invaders as brutal automatons in contrast to the brave Russians, whose music is often bright, bouncy and sometimes even folksy, then triumphantly heroic in a concluding paean of victory.

The cantata is only about forty minutes long and often coupled on disc with the symphonic suite of Prokofiev's first film score, *Lieutenant Kijé* (the third, *Ivan the Terrible*, is much more rarely encountered). The word "cantata" conjures up a rather more prim and sedate impression than applies to this epic score, which requires real attack and even a certain wildness to make its full impact and I give short shrift to any performance which smacks of tentativeness or understatement. I consider twenty-four recordings below: twenty-two are recordings of the cantata of which only one is in English and the rest are properly sung in Russian; the two other recordings are of the complete film scores in their different arrangements.

The Recordings

Fritz Reiner 1959 (studio; stereo) RCA; Urania – in English
Chicago Symphony Orchestra & Chorus; Rosalind Elias

This is in wonderful "RCA Living Stereo" sound and Reiner has at his disposal a crack orchestra and choir – I wonder if he ever made a bad recording. It is in English, but in truth Prokofiev's orchestration is often so heavy and percussive that the words are in any case often inaudible in the splendid din; what matters is the attack and general emotional ambiance and the choir could not be more energised and committed. This is a stirringly played, sung and recorded account, up with the very best; the listener will be struck by the precision of the playing and the variation in dynamics.

As much as I usually admire Rosalind Elias, here, her slightly fluttery vibrato, Reiner's faster speed and the now very audible but incongruous English text make her solo for me less moving and effective than the very best versions, good as she is.

This is thoroughly enjoyable and involving but in the end I want a version in Russian with the Lament taken at a stately, more imposing speed, for all the excitement of the performance.

Thomas Schippers 1961 (studio; stereo) Sony
New York Philharmonic; Westminster Choir; Lili Chookasian

Schippers leads the New York Philharmonic in one of its finest phases in music which is extraordinarily sonorous, experimental and emotionally visceral in its impact. Subtlety and understatement are really not required in this showpiece and Schippers' brash, youthful attack suits this bold, brilliant music ideally. In addition, the sheer sound of this venerable recording is quite amazing, despite the recording being nearly sixty years old - especially now it has been cleaned up. There is a little shrillness in the strings and balances are occasionally odd - you find the saxophonist or the harpist sitting in your lap quite frequently - but play it loud on good equipment and you'll be overwhelmed.

In truth, compared with my favourite version by Abbado, I find Schippers' approach just a little leaden and brutish - appropriate to the subject matter, perhaps, but it relies more on bludgeoning the listener into submission with thunderous blows, whereas Abbado conjures more of a swirling maelstrom of sound at considerably pacier tempi than Schippers' more measured and deliberate timings. I think Abbado creates more of the sense of shifting mists and brooding catastrophe at the start of the great "Battle on the Ice" movement but it's still an aural feast and a thrilling ride, even if Schippers' control of the crescendo is hardly subtle. Shockingly, the disc makes no mention of the name of the fine mezzo who intones so gorgeously her lament over the dead on the battlefield: Lili Chookasian. I still prefer the uniquely plangent, pungent tone of Abbado's Obratzsova, who manages to suggest the profound melancholy and resignation to suffering of the Russian peasant rather better than Chookasian despite the beauty of her singing as singing per se. There is a raw, slightly naive character to Schippers' way with this music; overt and spectacular, while Abbado manages more nuance. The Westminster choir sing with real abandon, actually yelling when required, as befits Schippers' interpretation.

Karel Ančerl 1962 (studio; stereo) Supraphon
Czech Philharmonic Orchestra & Chorus; Věra Soukupová

The harsh, peaky, stereo sound lends a certain eeriness to the atmospheric opening depicting the icy, barren wastes, an effect enhanced by the wheezy Czech woodwind, and you can immediately tell that Ančerl has a feeling for this music. The robust, confident delivery of the chorus confirms that sense of purpose and empathy; nothing too refined or effete here. It seems to me that Ančerl judges tempi and phrasing perfectly throughout, generating huge, sombre impact in the Crusaders' music and not over-playing the flashy, jingoistic elements, aiming instead for almost brutal emotional honesty. "The Battle on the Ice" is one of the most electrifying and incisive on record, despite the unpleasant shriek in the sound – or does that perhaps enhance its effect? Věra Soukupová hasn't quite the hefty, trenchant tones of the greatest Slavic mezzos but the voice is firm and beautiful and she sings most expressively. The paean of triumph which concludes the work achieves just the kind of combination of jubilation and grandeur which eludes lesser versions by such as Bychkov, Casadesu or Masur. The Czech Philharmonic plays under Ančerl's incisive direction with wonderful precision and tone colour – qualities present in the coupling on my CD edition with the *Rite of Spring*. If you listen to this almost as a period piece rather than a modern, state-of-the-art recording, it certainly drives home.

Unfortunately, the edgy, shrill sound disqualifies this from being a prime recommendation but admirers of the conductor will want to hear it or own it as a supplement. I love it – if the sound were fuller this would be a top choice.

Yevgeny Svetlanov 1966 (studio; stereo) Melodiya
USSR State Academic Symphony; Yurlov Choir Capella; Larisa Andreyeva

I immediately knew I was going to like this recording when, within moments, I could hear many of the qualities I need in a successful performance of this cantata. It demands a certain roughness, menace and even wild elation to make the proper impact and the slightly harsh, topky sound actually enhances those features. Ensemble is sometimes approximate and there are blarps and blips but the sheer energy of the chorus's attack and the orchestra's dynamism carry the day.

The basses are trenchant and the tenors incisive in that very Russian fashion. I think Svetlanov takes some movements such as the "Song for Alexander Nevsky" a tad too deliberately but, again, that builds a sense of threat and expectancy as the two armies square up for the battle. The core of the piece is "The Battle on the Ice" which has all the eerie tension lacking in cruder versions. The alto soloist is good but not as rich-voiced or moving as the best exponents of the lament, such as Obratzsova, Finnie, Borodina and Alfreda Hodgson.

I can in good conscience recommend this recording as a really authentic experience, even if it is not a prime choice.

Leopold Stokowski 1970 (live; stereo) BBC Legends
Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra; Groot Omroepkoor; Sophia van Sante

This is as close to the experience of a live concert as you can get via the medium of recorded sound - not technically, of course; this is a live analogue recording from 1970, but in the sense of experiencing the excitement and immediacy of performers taking risks and throwing themselves into the moment.

Stokowski was a mere 88 years old when he conducted this; he had ample rehearsal time and it demonstrates his talent for bringing the best out of an orchestra and choir; they play and sing out of their skins, creating the right wild, ambiance.

In a live concert of three works, this raw, gutsy *Alexander Nevsky* is the tour de force and climax of the evening's entertainment. The choir covers itself in glory in its wholly credible facsimile of a Russian chorus, the tenors floating their impassioned melodic line and are then answered antiphonally by the grumbling basses. This is a wonderfully animated and almost savage account; the crucial centrepiece of "The Battle on Ice" could start more atmospherically - it's a bit gung-ho rather than conjuring up the early morning mists - but it arrives at a stunning climax. Soloist Sophia van Sante sings beautifully even if she doesn't quite have the authentic Slavic heft in her lower register that we hear from, say, Obratzova for Abbado.

The sound really captures the acoustic of a concert hall without losing impact or detail and audience noise is minimal. This is a superb testament to the magic Stokowski could weave with a willing orchestra and choir.

André Previn 1971 (studio; stereo) EMI
London Symphony Orchestra & Chorus; Anna Reynolds

This is a grand, imposing account with the LSO choir in particularly fine, full-voiced form, singing in what sounds like convincing Russian to my ears and really releasing their voices in the battle scene, only I cannot help finding that Previn overdoes the ponderousness of the Crusaders' chant in track 3 so the music loses momentum, for all that the orchestra makes such a thunderous sound. Similarly, I find "The Battle on the Ice" atmospheric and sonorous but at first just a mite too deliberate; however, Previn really whips up tension in the second half to provide a wild ride and he is aided by the really excellent EMI analogue sound. Anna Reynolds sings the Lament well but without any of the special richness or individuality of tone the greatest exponents of that most soulful of solos – and nary a hint of Slavic tang; she could be singing British oratorio.

For all its merits, this version does not quite tick all my boxes in the same way that the two or three best recordings do; it is nonetheless justly celebrated and will not disappoint unless, like me, you demand a more characterful mezzo-soprano.

Eugene Ormandy 1973/74 (studio; stereo) RCA Red Seal; Dutton Epoch Historic; HDTT
Philadelphia Orchestra; Mendelssohn Club of Philadelphia; Betty Allen

NB: I confess to not having heard this on CD, so my review is based upon the admittedly less satisfactory expedient of listening to it on YouTube, where the sound is nonetheless still surprisingly good.

Ormandy had already made a recording with the Philadelphia Orchestra - which he conducted for forty-four years - in 1949 but of course that was an early mono LP and furthermore sung in English. This

remake twenty-five years later is obviously much better sonically, being recorded in the grateful acoustic of the Scottish Rite Cathedral, but is not necessarily representative of Ormandy's best work. I am usually a big fan of Ormandy but I immediately find the opening bars of this recording jumpy and too fast – nervy rather than ominous – and there is a touch of the student glee club about the chorus – you can hear that some of the male voices are immature with nary a hint of Slavic heft - and a certain slickness about the orchestral playing which are even suggestive of – well, if not superficiality, let's say a lack of profundity. This is indeed brilliant, showy music but it can be moving and momentous as well as exciting; "The Battle on the Ice" trundles along competently enough but I don't sense much tragic grandeur in the great Lament for the Fallen and Betty Allen's voice is too throaty and uneven, with a pronounced beat, to bear comparison with the great exponents of the aria; she really does make a nasty, constricted sound - enough to rule out this recording for me altogether.

Her regrettable contribution apart, I can imagine anyone unfamiliar with better versions being satisfied with this flashy account but it skates over deeper emotional dimension and cannot be recommended.

Claudio Abbado 1980 (studio; stereo) DG

London Symphony Orchestra and Chorus; Elena Obraztsova

Despite being performed by an Italian conductor with a British orchestra and choir this is Russian to the core. I fell in love with this version the first time I heard it and return to it again and again, despite the claims of other interpreters. This is music which needs grabbing by the scruff of the neck and I am pleased to observe that here the LSO seem inspired, as they often were, by Abbado's direction. I am particularly impressed by the way they capture a different mood and atmosphere to characterise the warring parties: the Crusaders sound suitably barbaric and alien such that the Western listener will find himself emotionally loyal to the Russian patriots, rather than its assorted enemies, whether or not they intone Latin and call themselves Christians. I am not a Russian speaker but the London Symphony Chorus sound convincing to me and I do not think their attack and energy can be faulted. Some might prefer a younger, more vulnerable-sounding singer than Elena Obraztsova, but her beautiful, haunting singing as singing per se is mightily impressive. To me, she embodies both the soul of a nation in mourning and the proud grief of a young woman whose fiancé has given his life for his country.

The searing, keening wails which evoke the devastation caused by the Mongol hordes in the opening bars are marvellously chilling; similarly, the manner in which Abbado generates fear and tension via the shivering strings in the opening of "The Battle on the Ice" is quite extraordinary; you do not need to have seen Eisenstein's film to picture these scenes. This is music which transcends any crude attempt to categorise it merely as a film score or propaganda. Most of the reviews I have read elsewhere chime with mine; I simply do not understand the one or two dissenting voices who find it "bloodless" and label the sound "a little lifeless". If anything, the DG analogue sound is a little over-bright but it matches the young Abbado's taut, gripping interpretation.

Riccardo Chailly 1983 (studio; digital) Decca

Cleveland Orchestra & Chorus; Irina Arkhipova

The presence of the great Irina Arkhipova is enough to attract the voice-maven to this recording but she has only six minutes of exposure in a forty-minute work. A veteran here in her late fifties, she is still clear-voiced, expressive and authentically Slavic but by this stage of her career without the lower-register resonance which marks out the best exponents of the Lament.

Chailly directs a fine performance which is properly paced, although some orchestral passages sound a tad sluggish. The main problem here is that overall it lacks somewhat of the brooding mystery and visceral impact which characterises my favourite versions; the Cleveland makes a bright, bold sound which seems – well, almost too American to my ears. The chorus shares a similar clean-cut quality which lacks weight and darkness required – and the tenors evince some strain. "The Battle on the Ice"

goes best and the early digital sound helps its impact. There is nothing much wrong with this bit it lacks distinction and even, on occasion, energy – and the CD has no coupling, thus offers only forty minutes of music.

André Previn 1986 (studio; digital) Telarc

Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra; Los Angeles Master Chorale; Christine Cairns

Previn's digital remake had to be good to top the fine recording he had already made for EMI fifteen years earlier – and very good it is, too. The sound here is demonstrably superior over its analogue predecessor and the choir and orchestra if anything more virtuosic, but Previn's interpretation remains much the same: grand, weighty, and just a bit slow at key points for my taste. Nonetheless, he has a command over the broad sweep of the piece and it makes a cumulative impact, its climactic points enhanced by the extra punch of the digital sound. I prefer Christine Cairns' darker, more soulful sound to Anna Reynolds' and find more expressive depth here than in the 1971 recording which is occasionally a tad sluggish. I did not expect to be saying this, but Previn's later recording is the better choice, despite his EMI version being more celebrated.

It must said that here my verdict is completely at odds with the MWI colleague who previously [reviewed](#) this recording. Such are the vagaries of critical taste.

Neeme Järvi 1987 (studio; digital) Chandos

Scottish National Orchestra & Chorus; Linda Finnie

It is strange how quickly the listener can sometimes tell if a recording is going to work; this one immediately has the right atmosphere and the chorus' entry confirms that promising augury. Tempi are very measured but Järvi's phrasing is weighty and portentous, so there is rarely any danger of the level of tension dropping, even if I occasionally wish for just a little more momentum. The battle scene is splendid – I particularly like being able to hear the tinkle of the triangle, just as you would in the concert hall; it builds to a climax just this side of chaotic, as it should. The choir sounds enthusiastic and sufficiently voluminous, and the singers have been well-coached in their Russian, nearly screaming the invaders' chant without actually sacrificing musicality. Finally – mirabile dictum – we hear a mezzo-soprano in Linda Finnie who is the vocal equal of Elena Obraztsova for Abbado – and that is virtually never the case. Her rich, burnished tones are deeply moving; I could only wish she had made a slightly better job of her concluding pianissimo C. I am aware that this, along with the Abbado recording, has for many years been the go-to option for a lot of listeners and I can see why. Like the Abbado, its provenance is hardly Russian, but that doesn't seem to have hindered its striving for authenticity and it is certainly one of the best options. The quality of the digital recording is first class: spacious yet detailed (as per the triangle above).

Yevgeny Svetlanov 1988 (live; stereo) ICA Classics

Philharmonia Orchestra & Chorus; Alfreda Hodgson

This is a splendid live performance from the Royal Festival Hall. That location, before its expensive and successful refurbishment, was never especially gratifying from a sonic point of view but the engineers did a great job in counteracting its dead acoustic and ICA the remastering is very successful, if not perfect, especially with regard to the definition of the choirs' words. There is also very little audience noise.

Here with Svetlanov, I hear all the mystery and menace I expect from a great account of this fascinating and atmospheric score; he combines the requisite Russian roughness with far more variety of dynamics and subtler phrasing than Gergiev, for example, who seems to have little to say about the music beyond giving it a loud run-through. The Philharmonia Chorus sounds better than its Russian counterpart for Gergiev and their Russian seems pretty authentic - insofar as we can hear their words

in a slightly blurred sound-picture. The absence of texts will be a blot and hindrance for anyone who hasn't got them in other issues; both works really need them to be properly appreciated. Alfreda Hodgson sings her lament gorgeously, with rich, pseudo-Slavic tone and a deep feeling for the words; she is as good as the very best here, alongside Obraztsova and Borodina. What a loss was her premature death in 1992.

If the absence of texts is not an issue, this is a very viable option. I am delighted that John Quinn agrees with me in his [review](#) back in 2012.

Dmitri Kitayenko 1990 (studio; digital) Chandos
Danish National Radio Symphony & Choir; Ludmila Schemtchuk

Kitayenko makes the slow, atmospheric opening very dark and brooding, an effect heightened by the broad acoustic of the Danish Radio Concert Hall. This recording has a lot of space around it, with choir and orchestra quite distanced but still present in an authentic, realistic concert soundscape. However, some listeners might miss the “in your face” effect of recordings more obviously the product of microphone placement and mixing manipulation; listening to this, I certainly feel somewhat removed from events, as flat recording cannot replicate what the human ear hears live. Turning up the volume does not improve impact; it only makes it too loud.

Otherwise, much here is very satisfying. The choir is properly animated with good basses and tenors up to the high tessitura of their line and the orchestral playing is excellent. Ludmila Schemtchuk, of whom I have not heard, is an impressive soloist with a poignant catch in her change of registers – but again, too distant and her lowest notes are sometimes lost. This is this is a fine performance but for reasons of sound, not a first choice.

Charles Dutoit 1990 (studio; digital) Decca
Orchestre symphonique et Choeur de Montréal; Jard van Nes

Superb Decca digital sound is an immediate bonus here but perhaps the warm acoustic of St Eustache is not ideal for this percussive music, giving it a softer edge; indeed, the performance as a whole is rather faint-hearted, without the visceral attack required. Similarly, the choir is a little woolly and polite – the men ridiculously so in “Arise, Ye Russian people” - the basses growl rather than boom and the Crusaders sound half-asleep rather than menacing until the reprise of their chant two minutes into track 3. They are more animated in battle scene, which goes much better, showcasing an excellent orchestra; Dutoit and his band recover some mojo here but never really give the listener goosebumps. Jard van Nes makes a good, straightforward soloist, without any particular Slavic quality to her sound. The finale is cheerfully lightweight and rather too fast.

In one sense this reminds of another recording of this piece from the Decca stable by Chailly, in that it is decent but unmemorable.

Kurt Masur 1991 (live; digital) Teldec
Gewandhausorchester Leipzig; ‘Latvija’ Choir; Carolyn Watkinson

Masur was a very inconsistent conductor. I treasure several of his recordings and shake my head at others; this is one of the latter. It is an absurdly rushed performance, coming in at five or six minutes faster than most. The playing is beautiful, as one might expect from the Leipzig orchestra, but Masur pushes the beat at every opportunity and the result is not exciting but instead breathless. “The Battle on the Ice”, for example, is fully two minutes faster than most and doesn't gain by that; it descends into a gabbled cacophony. The last movement, meant to be a hymn of praise, is a scramble. The choral singing is fine but the choir sounds too small compared with the most successful recordings; individual voices are audible and there is a lack of weight. Carolyn Watkinson suffers from being harried by

Masur's beat and what sounds like him grunting on every beat and while vibrant, she doesn't have the sumptuous tone of heftier voice, her low notes are sketchy and her final C, which should be serenely floated, is wobbly, unsupported and marginally flat.

This is by no means unlistenable, but compared with the finest, it is not a contender.

Eduardo Mata 1992 (studio; digital) Dorian
Dallas Symphony Orchestra & Chorus; Mariana Paunova

I am still in two minds about this recording: I love the weight and depth of the playing, which are enhanced by the sumptuous digital recording. The chorus is superb, singing with real passion and dark tone; likewise, the orchestra is on top form, producing a dark, grim account. The doubts are over whether it is sometimes too ponderous and so massive that momentum sags, so just occasionally you wish for more punch and drive. Nonetheless, there is such a feeling of menace and foreboding at key points such as in the stillness of the introduction to *The Battle on the Ice* – which builds inexorably, if a mite deliberately.

Mariana Paunova is a touch plummy and unsteady and her final note is poorly supported, but she is suitably melancholy and Slavic in tone; she delivers what is not by any means my preferred account of the Lament but equally does not actively spoil the recording as a whole.

In the end, I think the idiosyncratic pacing and lack of distinction in the soloist negate its virtues of stunning sound and the massive impact of climactic points, but it will still afford the listener great pleasure. (Its coupling with a fine Shostakovich Symphony No. 9 might swing it for some.)

Yuri Temirkanov 1993 (studio; digital) BMG/RCA Victor
St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra & Chorus; Evgenia Gohorovskaya

If you love this score as I do then you will certainly want to own this reconstruction of the film-track as it presents a somewhat different experience from the cantata normally heard in concert halls.

This reconstruction is more episodic and fragmented in that it follows the action of the famous film but is also furnished with an overture derived from music in the cantata. Owing to the inclusion in particular of extended battle music (including flights of arrows and the percussive duel with the Grand Master), a couple of brief, atmospheric excerpts from the original film track of the sounds of battle, and a slightly re-orchestrated version of the dissonant "Breaking of the Ice", it provides us with about ten minutes more music than we usually hear. The producer and arranger were not afraid to take a few minor liberties to transform the original score for reduced orchestra into a something which works when played by a larger band in a concert hall and for the most part their decisions really come off.

However, despite the claims of a reviewer elsewhere that this version "leaves Abbado and Reiner in the dust", I don't think this arrangement is all gain over those accounts. Abbado, Reiner and Schippers all manage to generate more bite and tension in the jagged, falling semitone figure with in the charging horses and onset of battle are figured and in truth the LSO and the New York Philharmonic are superior outfits to the St Petersburg Philharmonic. Furthermore, the rather too distantly recorded and faintly wobbly mezzo-soprano soloist Evgenia Gohorovskaya is not a patch on Obraztsova for Abbado, who is melancholy grief incarnate. Nor am I as impressed by the sound as some but as is so often the case, that might have as much to do with what equipment one is listening on, so I'll let that pass as this is obviously in good digital sound.

In the end I want to own both incarnations of this wonderful music but I certainly wouldn't jettison all the others in favour of this one.

Semyon Bychkov 1993 (studio; digital) Philips
Orchestre et Choeur de Paris; Marjana Lipovšek

This recording was essentially slammed and damned by the good, grey “Gramophone” for a weak chorus, erratic tempi, poor balances and self-conscious phrasing. I don’t think it’s that bad; matters start well enough with the authentically Gallic reediness of the winds and a sense of foreboding but I agree that the third “Crusaders in Pskov” section sounds laboured and the choir increasingly under-powered. “The Battle of the Ice” builds excitingly and delivers thrills but the choral entry seems muffled compared with the orchestra. Otherwise, the sound engineering per se is fine but that simply allows you to hear any deficiencies more clearly. Marjana Lipovšek sounds rushed in her solo and I don’t like her very nasal, hooty tone. In the finale, the chorus is masked by the over-loud orchestra, where undue prominence is given to the percussion, and there is little sense of jubilation because Bychkov’s rhythm is so plonkingly emphatic, and despite his attempting to underscore its impact by obligingly singing along. There is better to be had.

Jean-Claude Casadesus 1994 (live; digital) harmonia mundi; Naxos
Orchestre National de Lille; Latvian State Choir; Ewa Podles

Recorded live in Lille in digital sound which lacks somewhat in immediacy, this performance lacks the drive and edge required to bring the music alive – it is all far too genteel, the chorus sounding like Beecham’s bank clerks on an outing instead of a bunch of ferocious, blooded Russian warriors. Likewise, the invading Teutonic knights politely chant like a bevy of chaste monks. I cannot imagine that anyone in the audience that June night felt their neck-hair prickle. Nor does the orchestra do much to raise the temperature; “The Battle on the Ice” is a pleasant canter through the park. The victory celebrations are muted. The only thing preventing this recording from being a complete dud is the mesmerising contribution of Ewa Podles, whose smoky tones elevate proceedings considerably. Otherwise, this cannot be recommended.

Dmitry Yablonsky 2002 (studio; digital) Naxos
Russian State Symphony Orchestra; Stanislavsky Chorus; Irina Gelahova

This is the second recording by Yablonsky of this work and a far preferable alternative to the Casadesus version also on the Naxos label. The recorded sound is remarkably vivid and the performance generally taut and propulsive; I like it very much and find its comparative lack of polish to be a bonus in this Technicolor music (yes; I know the Eisenstein film was turned only a dozen years after the advent of talkies with *The Jazz Singer*, let alone colour, but Prokofiev’s music in modern recordings compensates for the vile sound of the original by letting us *listen* in colour). It has the additional and significant advantages of all-Russian performers and an experienced cellist-conductor- – and at a bargain price, to boot. Grainy woodwind, sonorous basses and a general vivacity of manner act as antidotes to the too polite and anodyne manner of the one or two less successful recordings featuring in this survey. The pace Yablonsky sets for the cavalry charge at the start of the battle is daringly fast but thrilling; this is a recording with attitude. The choir goes a bit flat at climactic points but their fervour compensates for the intonation issues. To cap a magnificent recording, Irina Gelahova – a singer whom I do not know - delivers a grand, richly intoned account of the Maiden’s Lament to match Olga Borodina in Gergiev’s contemporary and otherwise disappointing version. There is always a dark horse when I do a survey; this is it and the real deal.

Again, I am at odds with a MWI reviewer who came to [a different opinion](#). I can only offer my opinion and leave the rest to the gentle reader/listener.

Valery Gergiev 2002 (live; digital) Philips
Kirov Orchestra and Chorus of the Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg; Olga Borodina

Gergiev is a variable conductor, sometimes brilliant and sometimes routine; for me, this is an example of him in the latter mode. My favourite accounts reek atmosphere, whereas with Gergiev there is definitely something of the perfunctory and unsubtle about his reading: nuances and details go for nought, so there is a complete absence of the scalp-prickling anticipation which the prelude to "The Battle on the Ice" should create; Gergiev just blasts his way through the music aided and abetted by a rough, raucous Kirov choir.

The best thing here is the solo by Olga Borodina, whose lustrous, soulful mezzo and detailed Russian inflection of the text bid fair to rival the overwhelming pathos of Obratzsova for Abbado. I find the supposedly inauthentic LSO chorus to have a far heftier tone and a more impassioned, less-strained command of the high tessitura of the choral part. In addition, I hear no advantage in immediacy resulting from this being a live recording; the whole thing is to me rather tame and just loud and harsh without the gradations of dynamics and pacing which distinguish a truly masterful interpretation.

The range of opinions in reviews elsewhere demonstrates that there is no consensus about this recording, but I simply find it bland and blustery.

Frank Strobel 2003 (studio; digital) Capriccio

Radio-Sinfonie-Orchester Berlin; Ernst Senff Choir; Marina Domashenko – World Premiere Recording

This is a reconstruction from the composer's manuscripts of the original film score is undoubtedly fascinating to film and Prokofiev buffs; however, I am considering audio recordings from the point of view of the general listener and must assess it accordingly; it is thus probably best heard in the context of simultaneously viewing the film itself.

From a purely musical perspective, it is sometimes underwhelming, despite the quality of the sound, because it employs thinner orchestration and a smaller choir and our ears are habituated to the richer textures and continuity of the cantata arrangement; lots of pealing bells do not bridge the gap in the way that on-screen images can and the episodic succession of cues sounds almost random, thus nearly twenty minutes of extra music doesn't seem that much of a gain. The rasping brass blowing raspberries depicting the Crusaders sound crude and almost comical here and "The Battle on the Ice" is rather short-staffed and under-powered. For some, the impact of the Lament in "The Field of the Dead" will be vitiated by its first strophe being given to lower strings instead of the voice but I rather like it, as it is beautifully played and we don't have to wait long for Marina Domashenko to sing it in deep, even tones; once again, it rightly forms the emotional heart of the performance but the woodwind postlude reprising the melody seems superfluous out of the context of visuals and we are deprived of the climactic triumphal chorus in the much more satisfying form in which it concludes the cantata. This is certainly a recording of quality but ultimately it is more of specialist interest.

Oddly, the booklet gives translations of the texts into three languages but not even the transliterated Russian.

Dmitri Kitayenko 2015 (studio; digital) Oehms

Gürzenich-Orchester Köln; Czech Philharmonic Choir, Brno; Agunda Kulaeva

Twenty-five years after his recording in Denmark, Kitayenko has recorded another *Alexander Nevsky* here in considerably deeper, more vivid sound and I like a lot about it; Kitayenko successfully embraces the whole gamut of moods and textures in this wonderful music, phrasing sensitively in what can degenerate into bombast in the wrong hands (like Gergiev's) and shading dynamic nuances skilfully, but letting his forces off the leash when necessary. There is a convincing massiveness about the invaders' music without it courting stasis. He has an excellent orchestra and an energised, full-voiced choir to do his bidding; the latter is rather distanced but makes a big noise – with great basses - and the finale in particular is really impressive, despite some details getting lost in the wash of sound.

Soloist Agunda Kulaeva is very expressive and has the right rich, fruity, Slavic timbre but also just the beginnings of an equally recognisable Slavic beat or wobble in her vocal production. This will not disappoint any buyer but it's not quite the best option.

Thierry Fischer 2016 (live; digital hybrid CD/SACD) Reference Recordings

Utah Symphony Chorus; University of Utah A Capella Choir; University of Utah Chamber Choir; Utah Symphony; Alisa Kolosova

This is the most recent of the releases reviewed here. There is no doubting the initial excellence of the sound, even on conventional stereo equipment and the orchestral playing is impressive. I am less keen on the reverential manner of the massed choirs; there is a lack of bite and attack in both their pronunciation and their attack on musical phrases and it is all rather low-key. I first wondered if my response was simply the result of Nevsky-fatigue, this being the last recording I listened to for the purposes of the survey, but having previously listened to the penultimate version from Mata I found that far more involving and, in the end, must convict this one of mere blandness. The Teutons seem to be sleep-walking; just going through the motions is not going to give us the shivers and little of the requisite spirt of wildness obtrudes. I doubt whether the staccato delivery of the last "peregrinus" is authorised by the score as no-one else does it; in any case, it doesn't work and just sounds affected. Then, equally peculiarly, the supposedly rousing next track, "Arise, People of Russia" simply sounds perky while the introduction to *The Battle on the Ice* is largely devoid of atmosphere and the chorus' outbursts suddenly sound oddly muffled and dominated by the orchestra placed too far forward in the aural landscape in comparison the singers. I am no conductor, but to my ears the beginning of the cavalry charge at 1:57 is almost risibly prosaic and I submit that a sudden accelerando of the kind applied around 4:10 will not guarantee excitement but instead sounds clumsily and artificially applied. I imagine that Thierry Fischer is attempting to introduce via these stratagems the individual touches which distinguish a new recording from its predecessors but I am sorry to say that, coming to this one having heard so many successful interpretations, I am not convinced. A mezzo soloist with a nice, full, but unvaried tone, a minimum of emotional involvement in her delivery of the text and a vibrato approaching a beat does not help enhance my appreciation of this recording.

There is certainly more animation in the final, triumphant hymn but confused, muddy sound still compromises the listener's pleasure. Sorry; no, and again I find myself at odds with [a fellow MWI reviewer](#).

Recommendations

There is really only one option for the film complete score and that is Temirkanov's recording, whose large orchestra and choir make considerably more impact than Strobel's reduced forces; however, the latter is more "authentic" to Prokofiev's conception. The Prokofiev aficionado will be intrigued to hear one or both of those, but most listeners will want the best recording of the cantata. There, we are spoilt for choice. There are numerous highly recommendable recordings – Reiner, Schippers, Svetlanov, (twice), Stokowski, Kitayenko (twice) - and very few duds, but for me the best of them combine visceral impact with Slavic soulfulness and feature in the Lament a vocal soloist of outstanding depth, heft and richness. I find that combination most readily in Abbado's recording, but Yablonsky in his second recording gives us a really Russian account, too, with Järvi's and the later Previn recordings both claiming attention. In almost "historical" – yet still thin stereo – sound, Ančerl demands special consideration, however - and I also urge you to hear Ewa Podles' haunting singing in [this YouTube clip](#).

First choices (cantata): Abbado 1979; Yablonsky 2002

Second choices (cantata): Järvi 1987; Previn 1986; Svetlanov 1988

Complete film score: Temirkanov 1993

Ralph Moore