

Serge Prokofiev and Eugene Szenkar: The First Performance of the *Russian Overture Op. 72* in Eretz Israel

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The composers who turn to folklore can be divided into two groups: those who use the folklore and those who create music based upon unique peculiarities of folklore. Rimsky-Korsakov and Tchaikovsky serve as examples of both types.

— S. Prokofiev¹

I

There is a lot that is unknown and inexplicable in Prokofiev's life and music. This unique composer, with his unique fate, inspires us to search in the archives for answers to a number of troubling questions. One of these archives is the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (henceforth RGALI)—the largest collection of the composer's works, containing more than 2,500 items.

While looking through the contents of the archive, I accidentally came across one of Prokofiev's notebooks, to which researchers have had free access. These contained annotated programs from the performances of Prokofiev's works (from September 1935 until 18 February 1953).² The brief information contained there included the following:

- the name of the town (country) and the place of performance;
- the year and name of the conductor (or soloist);
- the name of the work and the name of the composer.

Of course, Prokofiev was not aware of all of the performances of his works, and it is mainly his concerts in the West that are included. Prokofiev returned to Moscow in 1936—that terrible period in Russian history when trips abroad were severely restricted and the authorities controlled every contact with foreigners. Prokofiev usually received information about the fate of his works in the West from his correspondence with friends, from newspaper extracts that were sent to him, or during personal meetings.³

There was one piece of information in the notebook that particularly drew my attention. It was written in English:⁴

Tel-Aviv, November, (19)38
The Palestine orchestra
Eugene Szenkar, conductor
Russian Overture – Pro(kofiev)

This short item arouses questions that have so far remained unresearched. Why was the *Russian Overture* performed in Palestine in 1938? What was the exact date of the concert (or concerts)? Why did Szenkar conduct this work and what was the Palestine Orchestra like at that time? What

¹ "Beseduya s Sergeem Prokofievym" (1935), quoted in *Prokof'ev o Prokof'evye: Stat'i, interv'yu*, ed. V[ictor] P[ailakovich] Varunts (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1991), 129.

² RGALI, f. 1929, Op.1, yed. khr. 312.

³ Prokofiev was still allowed to go abroad for the first two years after returning to the Soviet Union. The last time he went on tour to America and Europe was between January and March 1938.

⁴ RGALI, f. 1929, Op.1, yed. khr. 312, p. 17.

was the local reaction to music of an almost unknown modern composer? What were the Russian national sources of this work?

Prokofiev completed the score of his *Russian Overture* on 25 September 1936 and it was performed in the Great Hall of the Moscow Conservatory by Szenkar (1981-1977)—a talented young Hungarian conductor of Jewish origin a month later, on 29 October 1936.⁵

II

Prokofiev never had a strong and long-lasting friendship with Szenkar, as he did with Nikolai Myaskovskiy (1881-1950), Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929), Igor Stravinskiy (1882-1971), and Pyotr Suvchinskiy (1892-1985). The meetings and correspondence between Prokofiev and Szenkar were of a purely businesslike nature. From Prokofiev's recently published *Diaries*, we know that there was a correspondence between them regarding the performance of the opera, *The Love for Three Oranges*, which took place in Cologne on 14 March 1925. Szenkar, who was the general musical director of the Cologne Opera House at the time, conducted the opera. Prokofiev himself was present at this European premier of the opera and, in his opinion, the performance was very successful, "much more perfect, although less luxurious than in America. The public and the press showed more understanding than in New York and Chicago."⁶

Some quotations from Prokofiev's *Diaries* follow:

*May 29th, 1924*⁷

The day started very well: a letter from Szenkar, the conductor of the Cologne Opera, in which he expressed with great flattery his wish to stage *Love for Three Oranges*.

*July 13th, 1924*⁸

(...) A very pleasant letter from Szenkar. He praises "chef d'oeuvre," *Three Oranges* and promises without fail to stage it in winter in Cologne.

*March 9th, 1925*⁹

(...) Met Szenkar in the evening. He is young, very amiable, has a small wife with big eyes—very amiable as well, but it can be felt—she is a shrew. They are genially enthusiastic about *Three Oranges*.

*March 10th, 1925*¹⁰

The piano rehearsal. When I came in, I was introduced. Everybody stood up and I bowed. The rehearsal is very animated, the chorus accentuates excellently. Szenkar plays a tempo that is not mine, I cautiously point this out to him, but he reveals stubbornness. I give up, since my principle is not to interfere at all in the interpretation of the artist, if it is done consciously and thoughtfully.

⁵In RGALI they have the piano score of the Russian Overture Op. 72 (RGALI, f. 1929, Op. 1, yed. khr. 156). Prokofiev put the date on the ninth page after he finished the first version, Moscow, 25 September 1936.

⁶S[emyon] I. Shlifshteyn, ed., *S.S. Prokof' yev: Materiali, dokumenti, vospominaniya* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye muzikal'noye izdatel'stvo, 1961), 174.

⁷Sergey Prokof' yev, *Dnevnik 1907-1933*, ed. Svyatoslav Prokof' yev, 2 vols. (Paris: Serge Prokofiev Estate, 2002), 2: 260.

⁸Ibid., 272.

⁹Ibid., 308.

¹⁰Ibid.

*October 31st, 1925*¹¹

(...) Met Szenkars in Cologne. Dined together. They will stage *The Shout* this year. Certainly want the *Fiery Angel* (this time for sure. During the staging of the *Oranges* I mentioned it, but Szenkar answered “possibly”).

*October 11th, 1926*¹²

(...) After the Berlin staging which was rough and made without love, thought about the Cologne staging and felt an urge to write Szenkar a few warm words, which I did. My relationship with him is somewhat choked. He was probably offended by my keeping silent about the staging of *Fiery Angel* in Cologne, despite the fact that the plot of the *Fiery Angel* takes place in Cologne and it seems that this is the right place for its world premiere. However, since the Cologne audience digested the *Oranges* with effort, how would it react to the *Angel*!

Szenkar’s creative life was quite successful. When the fascists came to power in 1933, he left Germany and, from 1934 to 1937, was the director of the Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra. He also worked at the Moscow Conservatory as a professor in a conducting class.

At that time, Prokofiev was seriously considering moving permanently to Moscow, and between 1934-37, like Szenkar, he was a professor at the Moscow Conservatory in a composition class, advising young composers—graduates and post-graduates.

Szenkar and Prokofiev had a lot in common. They were both musicians with a worldwide reputation; they were also the same age—born in the same year and even in the same month (Prokofiev—23 April 1891; Szenkar—9 April 1891). At a certain period in their lives, both moved from Europe to the Soviet Union. After eighteen years of living in exile, many of his compatriots viewed Prokofiev as a person with a different psychology—unfathomable, and even “hostile” to the Soviet regime. Prokofiev returned to a homeland that had become “foreign” to him. One can assume that his elegant external appearance, his newly purchased America Ford car, and his too free manners of a Westerner irritated his Russian colleagues.

Szenkar, who was born in Hungary, had never lived in the Soviet Union. In contrast to Prokofiev, he was a “foreigner among foreigners” and, for this reason, he returned to the West in 1937 as soon as the political situation in the Soviet Union became aggravated. In 1939, he became the manager of the Municipal Theater in Rio de Janeiro. Between 1940 and 1946, he was the conductor and the artistic director of the Brazilian Symphony Orchestra. In 1947, he conducted the NBC Symphony orchestra in New York. In 1956, Szenkar directed the opera theater in Dusseldorf and Dasburg, and was guest conductor in Toronto, London, Manchester, Paris, Vienna, Brussels, Antwerp, Madrid, Lisbon, Porto, Barcelona, Leningrad, Kiev, Palestine, Goetenborg, Oslo and The Hague.

It was quite natural that Prokofiev and Szenkar, who had already been acquainted in Europe during the 1920s, should have renewed their relationship after meeting again in Moscow. The two families used to visit each other. Prokofiev’s first wife, Lina Ivanovna Prokofieva (1897-1989), wrote about those meetings: “We used to drive around the suburbs of Moscow and show them to the musicians who came to visit us, including our old friend, the conductor Szenkar, who once conducted the opera *The Love for Three Oranges* in Cologne.”¹³

¹¹ Ibid., 353.

¹² Ibid., 444.

¹³ Lina Prokofiev, “Iz vospominaniy,” in *Sergey Prokof’ev: Stat’i i materialy*, ed. I. Nest’ev and G. Edel’man (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1962), 205-206. After Prokofiev’s death, Szenkar paid tribute to the great composer by writing an article about his opera *Love for Three Oranges*. In this article, he described in detail the enthusiastic reaction of the audience and of Prokofiev himself to the staging of this opera. See Eugene Szenkar, “Lubov’ k trem apel’siman (Pervaya nemetskaya postanovka: Keln, 1925),” in *Sergey Prokof’ev: Stat’i i materialy*, ed. I. Nest’ev and G. Edel’man (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1962), 376-79.

III

Prokofiev completed his *Russian Overture* during the first year of his permanent move to the Soviet Union. Unlike his other works of that period—incidental music for the unrealized theatrical production of Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (1936) and *Yevgeniy Onegin* (1936), a score for the uncompleted 1936 film *The Queen of Spades* (*Pikovaya dama*), and a cantata *For the Twentieth Anniversary of October Revolution* (1936)—the *Russian Overture* was performed with great success exactly a month after Prokofiev had composed it.¹⁴

Prokofiev showed Szenkar the drafts of the *Russian Overture*, and was interested to hear his opinion. Szenkar looked carefully through each line of the score and immediately told the composer: “Complete this work and I will perform it with the Moscow Philharmonic Orchestra.”¹⁵

A journalist from *The Palestine Post*¹⁶ wrote that it was not easy to interview conductor Szenkar. “In fact, usually it is his blonde and pretty wife (accompanying him on this tour) who manages his interviews and the practical side of the musician's existence. He prefers to be on the platform conducting the music rather than talking about it.”¹⁷

However, Szenkar told of an interesting incident that had occurred during the first rehearsal in Moscow. Present in the hall were the conductor's wife, Prokofiev himself, and the most important member of the Szenkar family, Blackie, their pedigree two-year-old Scottish Terrier, who had “a marvelous ear for music.”

Blackie was all attention, ears cocked, eyes fixed on the conductor. The last bars of the piece, performed by trombones and trumpets were somewhat atonal and were too much for Blackie, brought up on Bach and Beethoven, and he burst into howls of despair. The orchestra, the conductor and the composer roared with laughter and Prokofiev declared he would have to alter the ending. But Mr. Szenkar doesn't divulge whether he actually did.¹⁸

The first version of the *Russian Overture* was scored for quadruple winds.¹⁹ Prokofiev had used such a large orchestra before in his early works—in *Scythian Suite Op. 20* (1914-15) and in the cantata *Seven, They are Seven, Op. 30* (1917), but now it was dictated mainly by the political spirit of the time. The immense changes in the young Soviet State demanded appropriate musical expression. The leaders of the Communist Party welcomed the mightiest, the most grandiose, despite the fact that the “overture” as a genre usually sounds more like chamber music.

¹⁴ A year had passed and Prokofiev again asked Szenkar to conduct the premiere of the second suite from *Romeo and Juliet*, which took place on 23 April 1937 in the Moscow Conservatory.

¹⁵ “On the Eve of Szenkar's Arrival,” *Davar* (13 November 1938): 2 (trans. from Hebrew).

¹⁶ Today's *Jerusalem Post* was called the *Palestine Post* until 1950

¹⁷ “Eugen Szenkar Here Again. Opens Palestine Orchestra Season Tomorrow,” *The Palestine Post* (November 1938): 9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ It was published in *Muzgiz* (*Gosudarstvennoe muzikal'noe izdatel'stvo*), in 1946. There also exists a second (simplified) version, musically identical to the first, but scored for triple winds, which was published in Paris by A. Gutheil in 1938. The Gutheil Publishing House was one of the biggest in Russia before the October Revolution. In 1914 the company changed hands and became S.A. and N.F. Koussevitzky—the owners of *Russkoye muzikal'noye izdatel'stvo* (The Russian Musical Publishing House).

Table 1²⁰ Prokofiev's Works that Require a Large Symphonic Orchestra

Instruments	Scythian Suite	Seven, They Are seven	Russian Overture 1st version - 2nd	
Flutes	4	4	4	3
Oboes	4	4	4	3
Clarinets	4	4	4	3
Bassoons	4	4	4	3
Trumpets	4	4	4	3
Horns	8	8	8	4
Trombones	4	4	3	3
Tubas	1	2	1	1
Timpani	V	V	V	v
Percussion	4 to 9 performers	4 to 9 performers	7 performers	3
Piano	V	V	V	v
Celesta	V	V		
Harps	2	2	2	2
Strings	V	V	V	v

Szenkar became the spiritual father of the *Russian Overture*: he brought it into the world in Moscow, then in Paris on 9 January 1937, and later in other European cities. “An Overture is one of the most up-to-date classical compositions. It contains a lot of nuances and it is very clear,” commented Szenkar.²¹ Prokofiev himself was most appreciative of the Moscow premier: “I would like to congratulate the Philharmonic with a worthy opening of the season, and E. Szenkar, who was conducting by heart, for being able to comprehend this most complicated score already from the first performance.”²² It is important to mention that the score had not yet been published, and Szenkar used Prokofiev's handwritten manuscript.

The *Russian Overture* is not one of Prokofiev's most performed compositions. Yet, it attracted the most outstanding musicians around the world such as Sergei Koussevitzky (1874-1951), Leo Ginzburg (1901-79), and Alexander Gauk (1893-1963). The composer himself performed it, and even Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957) took an interest in it.²³

A List of Performances of the Russian Overture from 1937 to 1944 (according to RGALI documents)

29 October 1936. Moscow. The Great Hall of Moscow Conservatory. The Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra. Conductor – E. Szenkar. Premiere.

8 December 1936. Moscow. The Great Hall of Moscow Conservatory. Conductor – E. Szenkar.²⁴

9 January 1937. Paris. Concerts Padeloup. Theatre National de l'Opera Comique. Festival de Musique Russe. Conductor – E. Szenkar.²⁵

²⁰ This table is cited from Noelle Mann, “Breathless with Excitement,” *Three Oranges: The Journal of the Serge Prokofiev Foundation* 2 (November 2001): 23.

²¹ “For Eugene Szenkar's Arrival,” *Davar* (13 November 1938): 2 (trans. from Hebrew).

²² Prokof' yev, “Novaya sovetskaya simfoniya,” in *Prokof' yev o Prokof' yeve: Stat' i i interv'yu*, ed. V[iktor] P[ailakovich] Varunts (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1991), 146.

²³ S. Prokofiev to N. Myaskovskiy, 2 March 1938, Hollywood: “Listened to Toscanini, who played rubbish, but how! He started to study my Russian Overture but then was startled by something and put it aside (at that time I wasn't in New York and don't know the details).” In *S.S. Prokofiev i N.Ya. Myaskoskiy: Peregipiska*, ed. D.B. Kabalevskiy, (Moscow: Vsesoyuznoye izdatel'stvo Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1977), 457.

²⁴ RGALI, f.1929, Op. 1, yed. khr. 312, p. 17.

²⁵ In this concert the following works were performed: Shostakovich's Piano Concerto, Borodin's Second Symphony, Myaskovskiy's Symphony No. 16. RGALI, f. 1929, Op. 1, yed. khr. 914. The information about the performances was found in RGALI, f. 1929, Op.1, yed. khr. 630, 571, 914, 904; RGALI, f. 1929, Op.2, yed. khr. 628, 630.

15 April 1937. Leningrad State Philharmonic. Conductor – Fritz Shtidri. The first performance in Leningrad.

23 April 1937. Moscow. The Great Hall of Moscow Conservatory. The Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra. Conductor – E. Szenkar.

25 April 1937. Moscow. The House of Science. The Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra. Conductor – E. Szenkar.

15 and 16 October 1937. The Boston Symphony Orchestra. Conductor – Sergei Koussevitzky. The first performance in America.

14 November 1937. London, Covent Garden, Philharmonic Orchestra. Conductor – Albert Coats. First performance in England.

22 November 1937. Leningrad Philharmonic. Festival of Soviet Music.

12 November 1938. Tel Aviv. Hata'arucha (The Exhibition). Saturday. Palestine Orchestra. Conductor – E. Szenkar.²⁶

14 November 1938. Jerusalem. Arison. Monday. Palestine Orchestra. Conductor – E. Szenkar.

17 November 1938. Haifa. Armon Palace. Thursday. Palestine Orchestra. Conductor – E. Szenkar.

19 November 1938. Baku (the first version). Azgosfilarmoniya. Conductor – Leo Ginzburg.

24 November 1939 (or 1940). The Great Hall of the Moscow State Philharmonic Orchestra. Conductor – Alexander Gauk.

20 May 1944. Moscow. Tchaikovsky Concert Hall. The State Philharmonic Orchestra. The Concert of Soviet and English music. Conductor – the author.

19 October 1944. Paris. Theatre des Champs Elysees. Conductor – Manuel Rosenthal.

IV

The 1938 performance of the *Russian Overture* in Palestine was a significant event in the history of the young orchestra, which had then existed for only two years. The manager of the orchestra was a young violinist from Poland—Bronislaw Huberman (1882-1947), who used to come to Palestine to play solo concerts. After his immigration to the Holy Land, he became the head of the Philharmonic Society and decided to organize an orchestra. He found the necessary financial funds, started looking for permanent musicians for this orchestra and took a direct part in planning the repertoire.

At that time, the orchestra was very uneven in quality.²⁷ Alongside accomplished and highly professional musicians, there were also some who were less competent. Two-thirds of the musicians were immigrants from various countries, with significantly different cultures.

²⁶ Prokofiev probably knew neither the exact dates of the concerts in Palestine, nor the number of the concerts or the towns where they were performed (except Tel Aviv). This information was drawn from the reviews on the Russian Overture in the *Davar*, *Palestine Post*, *Ha'aretz*, and *Haboker* newspapers.

²⁷ All the information about the Palestine Orchestra was taken from the book by Uri Toeplitz, *The History of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra. Researched and Remembered by Uri Toeplitz* (Tel Aviv: Sifat Poalim Publishing House),

The largest and most important group were of Polish descent (19 individuals) followed by those of German origin (16 individuals). They were followed by Austrians (10), Hungarians (4) and Dutch (4). The musicians who came from Poland played significantly better than did their associates from Hungary and Holland. The level of orchestral training musicians in Germany received was extremely high. The Polish musicians, who were a majority, were considered the most highly accomplished—but only those of them who had studied in Germany or in Austria. Surprisingly, they were even more highly regarded than the Germans. For many years, German was the main language of communication in the orchestra. It was the language used during rehearsals, during meetings and by the administration.

There was a wonderful group of violinists and violoncellists, yet there were only a few good contrabass and brass players. The Palestine Orchestra was compelled, therefore, to employ very young and inferior musicians, who had no experience at all.

It was impossible, within two years, to bring all the musicians to the same level. Apart from professional problems, the economic conditions in the country were also difficult. In comparison to other orchestras in the world, the payment was very low. Many musicians were forced to play in movie theaters before the show in order to provide for their families. They had to work in a heat that was difficult for Europeans to bear. Many of the musicians were unable to endure this situation. During the first two years, some left the country, and others worked in cafes and restaurants in order to survive. It took years before the orchestra started to sound genuinely professional.

Nonetheless, the standard of the orchestra was very high already during the first years of its existence. The fact that the famous conductor Arturo Toscanini conducted the concert dedicated to the establishment of the Palestine Orchestra, on 24 October 1936, speaks for itself.

Was Russian music performed in Eretz Israel? Twenty years before the official establishment of the orchestra, there had been chamber and symphonic concerts, to which musicians and music lovers used to gather from all over the country. Half of the public were Russian immigrants who had grown up on Russian music. In 1918, the well-known opera conductor Mordechai Golinkin (1875-1963) immigrated to Palestine from Odessa and started to carry out grandiose plans toward the development of musical life. Among the stage operas was *The Water-Nymph (Rusalka)* by the Russian composer Alexander Dargomizhsky (1813-69). Many Russian musicians came to Palestine, among them conductors like Oscar Fried (1935) and Dobrowen (1934), famous performers like the pianists Arturo Rubinstein (1927, 1932), and Alexander Borowsky (1931), the violinists Jasha Heifetz (1932) and Natan Milshtein (1934, 1935). There were more solo concerts than orchestral ones. Few works by Russian composers were performed in Palestine—the *Violin Concerto* of Alexander Glazunov (1865-1936), the *1812 Overture* and the *Serenade for Strings* by Tchaikovsky. Later on, the name of Serge Prokofiev would appear annually on the repertory list of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, but for now it remained unknown to the local public. Szenkar had the honor of carrying out this courageous project, and introducing to the audience the work of a great modern Russian composer.

V

Szenkar signed a contract for two seasons with the Palestine Philharmonic Orchestra in 1938, when the orchestra was already at the peak of its fame. What made a conductor with a worldwide reputation come to tiny provincial Palestine?

For a European accustomed to the comforts of civilization, Palestine, which was then under the British mandate, seemed a savage Orient. The State of Israel was established only in 1948 and, meanwhile, there were discussions about a “national home” where Jews from all over the world could live. The fees the musicians received were much lower than in other countries.

Nevertheless, to stand in front of the Palestine Orchestra, on the podium where the great Arturo Toscanini had stood, was a prestigious experience for any conductor.

It is doubtful that Szenkar came to Palestine because of his attachment to the Jewish people. In order to come to Tel Aviv he had to overcome a series of obstacles and humiliating procedures. He was a Jew by birth but not by conviction; he had in fact adopted Christianity.

From the very beginning of the orchestra's existence, Huberman had stated that no Jewish conductor who had changed his religion could conduct in "his" orchestra. This rule was strictly adhered to. Szenkar had to sign a document, therefore, wherein he declared that he had been forced to change his religion, but that, deep in his soul, he had always considered himself to be a Jew. This kind of declaration was usually sufficient for Huberman but, in Szenkar's case, he suspected that the declaration wasn't sincere. However, Szenkar was a well-known musician and Huberman had to give him the benefit of the doubt. Szenkar then went on a concert tour.

Szenkar returned to Palestine for the second time in November 1938, and brought the *Russian Overture* with him. "A year ago I left Palestine on a beautiful sunny winter day and I am willingly coming back," he told the orchestra musicians.²⁸

As a rule, the concert season started at the beginning of October. In September 1938, the tension in Europe was coming to a head. Due to the political situation, the season was delayed for a month, and started only on 12 November. That season's concerts were divided between four conductors: Szenkar, who had already fallen deeply in love with the local audience the previous season (three concerts and one concert with Huberman as soloist); Dobrowen (two concerts); Sargent (two concerts); and a conductor who was unknown at that time, Hermann Schenchen (two concerts), who had left Nazi Germany and moved to Switzerland.

Szenkar had the honor of opening the first subscription season in 1938. However, in addition to the three planned concerts (12 November—Tel Aviv, 14 November—in Jerusalem, 17 November— in Haifa), an additional concert was given on 13 November in Tel Aviv for members of the *Histadrut* (trade union), cheaper than the others.

A European conductor of Szenkar's stature must have been very strongly motivated in order to overcome all the difficulties he had had to face in order to come to Palestine.

Coming to Tel Aviv, Szenkar was faced with great obstacles and delays due to the flooded roads. When he got off the ship, he was welcomed by the general secretary of the Palestine Orchestra, Lebertov, and they set out from Haifa to Tel Aviv. On the way, they had to stop at Ramataim because they were unable to cross the bridge that had been ruined by flood. They took a side road, which prolonged their journey, and arrived in Tel Aviv only the following day.²⁹

But

the heavy rains did not appear to have impaired either the conductor's vitality or his good humor when interviewed on his arrival in Tel-Aviv on Tuesday. In buoyant spirits, alert as ever and full of that dynamic élan which is such a feature of his conducting, Szenkar expressed his happiness to be once more in Palestine, and if he did give a sigh for the wonderful weather of his last visit, he apparently felt, that even the dark skies could not affect his delight at the prospect of being here long enough to conduct four series of concerts, give a special performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, go to Egypt with the orchestra and, great honor as he felt it to be for any conductor, have Huberman as his soloist at the second concert-series.³⁰

²⁸ "For Eugene Szenkar's Arrival," *Davar* (13 November 1938): 2 (trans. from Hebrew).

²⁹ "The First Concert of the Orchestra," *Ha'aretz* (14 November 1938): 12 (trans. from Hebrew).

³⁰ "Eugen Szenkar Here Again. Opens Palestine Orchestra Season Tomorrow," *The Palestine Post* (November 1938): 9.

A week before Szenkar's arrival, the leading newspapers in Palestine—*Ha'aretz*, *Haboker* (*Daily Newspaper*), *Davar* (*Palestine Labour Daily*)—published a big advertisement announcing the program of these three concerts:

Prokofiev – Russian Overture
Weinberger – Polka and Fugue from Schwanda the Bagpiper
Tchaikovsky – Symphony No. 5
Kodaly – Hary Janos Suite
Wagner – Overture “Meistersinger”

On the eve of the premiere, the *Ha'aretz* newspaper published a long article and a photograph of Szenkar. Another article, under the title “The First Concert of Palestine Orchestra,” had a detailed analysis of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony. Not a word was written about Prokofiev.

VI

The conductor, in coordination with the manager of the orchestra, usually suggested the program for the concerts. Szenkar chose the *Russian Overture* as the first work to open the 1938 subscription season. “Szenkar is particularly interested in Prokofieff whom he considers to be one of the best contemporary composers: concentrated, clear, his colorful orchestration and what one perhaps cannot say of too many moderns, harmonious”.³¹ A heated discussion unfolded in the newspapers. A leading musical critic of the time, David Tverner Rosolio of the *Ha'aretz* newspaper, stated that the program “wasn't fit for the opening of the season.”

There usually arises a question – is it fair to play three modern works (out of five) unknown to the general public, compositions, which, by their essence and nature, will undoubtedly arouse differences of opinion among the listeners? It should have been clear from the very beginning that such a repertoire cannot raise the patriotic spirit— what is very important for the opening of the season from a musical point of view. It is a pity that, because of the chosen program, Szenkar didn't achieve the level of success he deserved as the conductor of the concert. Szenkar is a first-class musician. He combines some qualities that rarely coincide in one conductor. However, the lack of these qualities would make the performance imperfect. Szenkar becomes greatly absorbed by the smallest details of the score with all its subtleties even without using a printed score. At the same time, he presents and underlines the main idea of the work in all its scope and perfection. He is not looking for external effects. He feels the music while performing it and animates it in our consciousness.³²

Another critic expressed a different opinion: “E. Szenkar, who gained great fame as a conductor during some of the concerts in the previous season, aroused unceasing applause. The citizens of Tel Aviv remember the sense of happiness that the maestro bestowed on them in all his concerts. Thus, the whole concert became a great musical event.”³³

As opposed to the Moscow premiere, *The Russian Overture* was performed in its second (simplified) version for triple winds. The main reason for this was purely technical—the orchestra suffered from a lack of musicians.

In the library of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, I managed to find the only copy of the score, published by Gutheil in 1938, which Szenkar used while conducting the concert. Obviously, nobody had touched it since then—the *Russian Overture* has not been performed in

³¹ Ibid.

³² “The First Concert of Palestine Orchestra,” *Ha'aretz* (17 November 1938): 3 (trans. from Hebrew).

³³ “The Opening of the Palestine Orchestra Season,” *Ha'aretz* (14 November 1938): 5 (trans. from Hebrew).

Israel since then. The score still retains some notes written in red pencil (probably by Szenkar himself). They are few: accents, change of tempo, some technical instructions. Such is the language of conductors— laconic, simple, without too many words.

It is important to note that the *Russian Overture* was performed from the published score, not from the handwritten manuscript as at Moscow premiere. The piece received a very positive, though naïve, review in the local press. For the Russian reader, it may have sounded amusing that the musical images were directly compared with the characteristics of the Russian soul.

The concert opened with the *Russian Overture* by Sergie Prokofieff, one of the outstanding Russian modern composers. In this work, the composer seems to strive at giving musical expression to the characteristic features of the Russian and his soil. There is the wild, stamping rhythm of the peasants' dancing, there is the broad melodic line of a theme reminding one of the vast steppes and the majestic rivers of Russia. New and old interwoven in the overture; here a theme, and a harmonization, which Glinka could have written and there modern orchestration, and dissonances characteristic of the modern school. The long work, written as recently as 1936/7, has its important qualities; unlike so many others, it comes not only to display the technical abilities of its composer (though there is abundant proof of them), but it has a comprehensive underlying idea, adequately, expressed in musical language.³⁴

The concert, which took place on 12 November 1938, received a lot of publicity, despite the fact that Prokofiev was unknown to the Palestinian audience. This first concert also became a part of the country's tragic history. 9 November 1938 saw the beginning of the anti-Semitic demonstrations in Germany that later led to *Kristallnacht*. During the interval, Mr. Chelouche, the Chairman of the Orchestra Association, announced that, after the terrible events of the past days in Germany, the public had requested that Wagner's Overture to *Meistersinger* be removed from the program. "A woman started to cry. There were those who expressed their consent by applause, others gave their silent support. It was an unforgettable moment."³⁵ Instead of playing Wagner, the orchestra performed Weber's *Oberon Overture*.

The correspondent of *The Palestine Post* wrote that the question of whether or not Wagner's works should be performed by the Jewish orchestra in Palestine had been discussed before. "From a purely artistic point of view the answer must be in the affirmative, for Wagner was one of the outstanding geniuses of music in the 19th century and without his work the later development of operatic music and the orchestral treatment could hardly be understood."³⁶ He also stated that there was a human side to the question.

No art, after all, can exist and develop in a vacuum, unconnected with life. Wagner was sharply anti-Semitic; in his house Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the father of theoretical anti-Semitism grew up, and, more than that, Wagner's whole work was devoted to the glorification of the ancient German spirit and "weltanschauung", whose development has brought about the disasters of the last few years.³⁷

He was sure that the manager of the orchestra had done well in removing Wagner's work from the program. In his opinion, "it would be even better if the other works by Wagner scheduled for later symphony concerts were to be removed as well."³⁸

In fact, this concert turned out to be an "unexploded bomb." From that day on it was officially forbidden to perform Wagner's works in Israel.

³⁴ "Opening Concert of the Orchestra. Mr. Szenkar's First Series," *The Palestine Post* (18 November 1938):6.

³⁵ "The Opening of the Palestine Orchestra Season," *Ha'aretz* (14 November 1938): 5 (trans. from Hebrew).

³⁶ "Opening Concert of the Orchestra. Mr. Szenkar's First Series," *ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*

VII

As opposed to the *Overture in B Flat, Op. 42* (1926), sometimes called the *American Overture* (because it was commissioned in the United States), the *Russian Overture* was probably called “Russian” not because it was written in Russia, but rather because it was based distinctively on “Russian” themes. Prokofiev wrote: “While composing the *Classical Symphony* I had an idea to write the same miniature Russian Symphony and to dedicate it to Diaghilev for his concern about my Russian style.”³⁹ Now Prokofiev’s wish came true, and the “miniature symphony” in folk style turned into the *Russian Overture*.

Israel Nest’yev (1911-93), the Russian musicologist and author of the first monograph on Prokofiev, wrote that Prokofiev had carried out a preparatory study of the collections of Russian songs. I have not found any confirmation of this information, although it is well known that Prokofiev had already been acquainted with the Russian folk song genre when he composed his ballet *Shout Op. 21 (The Tale of the Buffoon, 1915-1920)*. In a letter to Stravinsky, he wrote: “Looking through Russian songs opened before me a lot of interesting possibilities.”⁴⁰ Nest’yev wrote further that, in the *Russian Overture*, “almost all the themes are close to original folk patterns and two dancing tunes in the main theme are directly borrowed from folkloric recordings.”⁴¹ I was unable to confirm this information.

While analyzing this type of work the researcher has to discover how the composer “works” with original musical material. Which theme can be considered a quotation? Can it be changed or must it remain inviolable? It is a known fact that when Prokofiev composed *Twelve Russian Folk Songs Op. 104* for voice and piano, he called on a famous expert on Russian folklore, Anna Rudneva, and asked her whether he was allowed to violate the rhythm and melody of a song in the process of arranging it. Rudneva answered that the author was free to interpret the tune as his creative mind told him.⁴² Prokofiev used this principle while working with folk material.

The *Russian Overture* is based on six main themes. The first three themes (“a,” “b,” “c”) are dance-like; the fourth (“d”) imitates a type of a lyric song; the fifth (“e”) recalls the typical Russian Orthodox melody (*znamenniy chant*) and the last one (“f”) like theme “e,” is based on lyrical song.

³⁹ S[emyon] I. Shlifshtein, ed., *S.S. Prokof'yev: Materiali, dokumenti, vospominaniya* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoye muzikal'noye izdatel'stvo, 1961), 159.

⁴⁰ “Letter of 3 June 1915, quoted in *Sergey Prokof'yev: Stat'i i materiali*, ed. I. Nest'yev and G. Edel'man. (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1962), 255.

⁴¹ I[srael] Nest'yev, *Prokofiev* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe muzikal'noye izdatel'stvo, 1957), 303.

⁴² A[nna] V[asil'evna] Rudneva, *Russkoye narondoye muzikal'noye tvorchestvo* (Moscow: Kompozitor, 1994), 9.

Example 1 Prokofiev, “Russian Overture”

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

(e)

(f)

Despite the contrast, all the themes are derived from the same essential idea. Therefore, it is easy to combine them. For example, theme “e” sounds together with “f” (Fig. 35)⁴³ and theme “a” appears with “e” (Fig. 54). The dance-like themes are usually symmetrical (2+2) in 2/4. They are also characterized by syncopated rhythm and by the play of weak and strong beats. It may be suggested that the first theme (“a”) is derived from the Russian folk song *U menia vo sadochke* (although Prokofiev didn’t mention it).

Example 2 Rimsky-Korsakov, *Sto russkich narodnich pesen* (St. Petersburg: Bessel, 1877), No. 31

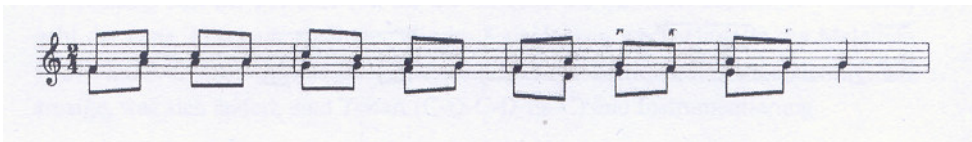
The second theme (“b”), in my opinion, is not a quotation from the original Russian song. Yet, it does have some common elements with “*tchastushki*” two-line or four-line folk verse, usually humorous and topical, sung in a lively manner).

⁴³ The Figure numbers refer to numbers in the score.

Example 3 Shurov, *Stilevye osnovy russkoyi muzyki* (Moscow, 1998), No. 27, p. 288. Chorovodnaya. Belgorodskaya obl.

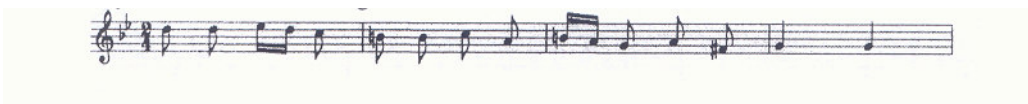


Example 3a Shurov, *Tchastushki* (Tul'skaya obl.), No. 117, p. 354



The same can be said about “c”: a changing meter (2/4 and 3/4, see Example 1), syncopated rhythm patterns imitate an old Russian folk instrument—balalaika, which is often used as an accompaniment for the “*tchastushka*.”

Example 4a *Russkiye naronnyje pesni, sobrannyje N.A.L'vovym. Napevy zapisal I garmonizoval Ivan Prach* (St. Petersburg, 1806), No. 22 (second strophe)



Example 4b Shurov, *Tchastushki* (Cheliabinskaya obl.), No. 138, p. 370

Balalaika

The lyrical cantilena melody (“d”), based on wide intervals, also contains the Russian national coloring.

Example 5 Rimsky-Korsakov, *ibid.*, No. 7

Moderato

Example 5a Rimsky-Korsakov, *ibid.*, No. 57

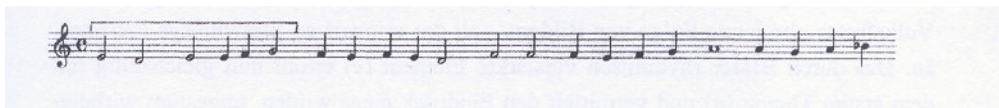


Example 5b Rimsky-Korsakov, *ibid.*, No. 63



The theme “e” is close to the ancient patterns of Russian church music—the *znamennyi* chant .

Example 6 *Obraztzy drevenerusskogo pevcheskogo iskusstva*. 2nd edition (Leningrad, 1971), No. 52. Dogmatic (fifth glas). Trans. N.D. Uspensky



The highly episodic Overture is purportedly in rondo-like form.

A (*allegro brio*). The first theme (“a”) is sounded by the clarinets and bassoons, element “b” is perceived as its continuation (Fig. 1) and melody “c” (Fig. 4), in unison with strings, completes the refrain. As in a kaleidoscope, the melodies change and replace each other: the interval structure remains unchanged, only the harmonic motion (C-D-C-D-Eb-C) and the orchestration are varied.

B (*moderato*, Fig. 10). The lyrical character of theme “d” is strengthened by the timbre of strings. The colorful tonality motion according to major thirds—B \flat (Fig. 10) – G \flat (Fig.12) – D (Fig.13) is typical of Romantic music. On the other hand, it also helps intensify the contrast.

A1 (*piu mosso*, Fig. 20). After the return of “a” in the home key, we hear its new rhythmical version (Fig. 22).

C (*andante cantabile*, Fig. 27). A lovely lyrical episode, in the spirit of *znamennyi* chant by cello, smoothly turns into a beautiful cantilena theme “f” in E Major. (Fig. 31). Again, a colorful tonality combination, based on a descending major third (A \flat -E), intensifies the association with Romantic music. The highlight of this episode is depicted by the two themes simultaneously sounding in *tutti* and *fortissimo* (Fig. 35) The different themes later pass quickly, like “masks”— the element “c” in a remote D \flat major (Fig. 39), motive “d” in C Major in strings and “e” in colorful E major (Fig. 44).

A2 (*piu animato*, Fig. 45). A recapitulation presented by trumpet solo. Gradually the music involves only the first phrase of “a,” sounding like *ostinato*. The bright national feast is halted by the harsh *glissando* of brass instruments.

The Overture is completed by a big coda (Fig. 54), which recalls Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*. Element “e,” in rhythmic augmentation of the brasses, sounds together with element “a,” depicting a swift and turbulent folk dancing.

Szenkar wrote: “Prokofiev paid little attention to what the world had to say about his music. It seems as if he has woven his melodies for the wonderful imaginary world of dreams or maybe for only a few people, who understand him....”⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Eugene Szenkar, “Lubov’ k trem apel’sinam (Pervaya nemetskaya postanovka: Keln, 1925),” in *Sergey Prokof’ yev: Stat’i i materialy*, ed. I. Nest’ yev and G. Edel’ man (Moscow: Sovetskiy kompozitor, 1962), 379.