Subject: Today's Recommendation: Sergei Prokofiev
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Born in Russian Ukraine in 1891 on the estate on which has mother had been a born a serf, Sergei Prokofiev received his first music lessons from her. After receiving private lessons with Reinhold Gliere, a summer visitor to the estate, in 1904 he enrolled at the prestigious St. Petersburg Conservatory, where he studied with Anton Liadov and Rimsky-Korsakov, among others. Already a talented composer, his first work (other than juvenilia), a piano sonata, was published and performed in Moscow in 1910; by 1913 he was traveling to Paris and London. He graduated from the Conservatory in 1914, winning a prize as pianist-composer of his Piano Concerto No. 1. The innovations and dissonances of his music led him to be described in the press as a “futurist.”During WWI he composed important works, including the Scythian Suite (1914) and his Classical Symphony (1916-17), in which he combined the formal style of Haydn with modern sound world. Thereafter, he left Russia and spent time in America and Europe.In the early 1930’s, the pull of Mother Russia tempted Prokofiev to think about returning to his native country. He accepted invitations to give a number of concerts in Russia. In 1936, he permanently returned to and became a citizen of the Soviet Union, just as Russia was swept up in the conflagration of the Great Terror. Prokofiev’s lengthy exposure to the perceived "infection" of foreigners and foreign influence, and his avant-garde music, quite predictably put him at particular risk. He was accused of decadence, confessed past weakness but affirmed his faith in traditional Russian music, and survived, continuing to compose under Stalin’s watchful eye.Stalin and Prokofiev remained linked in death as they had in life. Both died the same day, March 5, 1953.One of the many terrible ironies of Stalin was that this man of the new world became during the course of his life increasingly obsessed with the past. Although bolshevism envisioned the state withering away, consciously or subconsciously Stalin increasingly identified with the great and terrible figures of Russia’s autocratic past. Equally ironic is the fact that Stalin’s obsession resulted in some of the great film scores (and films) ever created – Ivan the Terrible, Parts I and II, and (the subject of this review) Alexander Nevsky.In the context of the rising threat of Nazism, it was Stalin himself who in 1937 first “suggested” the subject matter of Alexander Nevsky, a Thirteenth Century prince of medieval Kievan Rus (1220-63) who rallied the people of Novgorod to oppose and miraculously defeat an invasion by a powerful Teutonic army (1242). The famous Soviet filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein (“Strike” [1924], “Battleship Potemkin” [1925] and “October” [1927]) was chosen as director, and Eisenstein enrolled Prokofiev to compose the music. Released to ecstatic reviews in November 1938 (both Eisenstein and Prokofiev might well have been shipped off to the Gulag otherwise), the film was withdrawn after the Soviet Union and Germany signed their non-aggression pact in August 1939, and then revived after Germany invaded the Soviet Union in June 1941.Apparently reflecting techniques he saw used at the Walt Disney studios in the United States, Prokofiev worked closely with Eisenstein to create the music. Rather than composing the music at the end of the film, Prokofiev visited the sets and viewed the daily rushes, in many cases composing the music before scenes were edited, allowing Eisenstein to match his images to the music. In at least one case, Prokofiev composed the music for a scene before the scene was even filmed.The result is indeed a triumph. Bold orchestral and choral forces paint the brooding and bone-chilling yet sometimes beautiful Russian landscape; the noble simplicity, resilient humor and oppressive fear of the long-suffering Russian people; their faith in the noble, almost godlike prince; and their vigorous determination to defend their Motherland against the barbaric Teutonic

Knights and their sadistic priestly accomplices. All of this culminates in the music accompanying the Battle on the Ice, in which the opposing forces meet on frozen Lake Peipus, where Teutonic army, defeated in battle, is hurled by cracking ice into the cold and inky depths. In the aftermath, peasant women lament for the dead and comfort the wounded, and clanging bells and joyous song celebrate the great deliverance. This is quintessential Russian music.The film is itself one of the great works of the Twentieth Century, and you should see it. But the music can be appreciated without having seen the movie – in my case, it was the music (and my fascination with Stalin) that prompted me to see the movie several years later. (It's a substantial investment, but the 3-disc Criterion DVD release entitled "Eisenstein: The Sound Years", consisting of Alexander Nevsky together with Ivan the Terrible Parts I [1945] and II [completed in 1946 but condemned as "erroneous" and not shown until 1958], is incredible.)In 1939, Prokofiev composed a suite (officially, a "Cantata for Mezzo-soprano, Mixed Chorus, and Orchestra") of the music from the film, and it is in this form that the music is almost always heard. (Yuri Temirkanov conducts the St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra in a fine version of the original film score on RCA, but I seem to be one of the few who prefers it to the suite.) As for a performance, I would suggest Claudio Abbado leading the Chicago Symphony Orchestra on DG in a performance that feels and sounds entirely "authentic." As added bonuses on this mid-priced disc, you get fine versions of Prokofiev's Scythian Suite and Lieutenant Kije (1934). The performances form an excellent introduction to an underappreciated Twentieth Century master -- and to the musical soul of Mother Russia.Although not strictly relevant to the suite itself, I can't help mentioning several fascinating facts about the film. If there were any doubt about the intended correspondence between Stalin and Alexander, during filming Eisenstein (probably at Stalin's "suggestion", certainly with his approval) authored an article published in the official newspaper Izvestia drawing parallels between the two men. And lest the propaganda point of the movie be missed, it ends with Alexander's threat, "He who comes to us with a sword, shall die by the sword."Finally, and most poignantly, one reel of the movie (and corresponding music) was never shown and is lost. Shortly before the film's premiere, in response to a midnight call from the Kremlin (Stalin was a notorious night owl) Eisenstein's assistants, without waking him, rushed a copy of the movie to the Kremlin so that Stalin could have an advance screening. Stalin approved – but the version he saw was missing a reel, because Eisenstein was sleeping on top of it. Apparently afraid to distribute a version of the film other than the one viewed and approved by Stalin, Eisenstein omitted the reel Stalin didn't see.

Alexander Nevsky