



The programme notes from the YSO Summer 2019 performance of *Peter and the Wolf*. Written by our Musical Director, Edward Venn.

**Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)**

***Peter and the Wolf, Op. 67 (1936)***

In May 2019, it was widely reported in the British Press that the charity Youth Music advocated replacing Mozart with the grime artist Stormzy in the national curriculum in order to make music education more relevant to children today. (In fact, the report mentioned neither composer, but the chief executive of the charity did in a subsequent interview: it is easy to see which would grab the attention of journalists). How different things were in 1936 when Prokofiev was commissioned by the Children's Theatre in Moscow to write a work introducing children to the different instruments of the orchestra! Here, relevance was not a matter of orchestral versus popular music, but rather ensuring that the work reflected Soviet values. This to be expected of Russian composers of the Stalinist era, but in Prokofiev's case it was somewhat prudent. He had only returned to live in Soviet Russia earlier that year, after a lengthy period of self-imposed exile. His timing was not perfect: in January 1936 Stalin had famously denounced Shostakovich's music for its un-Soviet tendencies, and all composers must have been particularly alert to the dangers of non-conformity.

The theatrical nature of the commission meant that the work was to have words as well as music. Prokofiev rejected the first draft, in which a young Soviet boy ensures justice is done after correcting an adult (a plot frequently found in children's propaganda, and a natural precursor to directives to report non-Bolshevik thinking to the KGB...), due to his dislike of its rhyme scheme. In the end, he wrote his own plot, in which a Peter, a young boy full of Soviet virtues such as resourcefulness and bravery, ignores the warnings of his grandfather (an unsubtle symbol of the stubbornness of the older generation to embrace change) and goes out into the meadow outside the boundary of his home. This allows a duck – along with a bird and cat, one of a number of friendly animals – to escape, where it swiftly gets eaten by a wolf. Peter fetches a rope, and the wolf, bemused by the bird as it flaps around his head, is eventually ensnared. Having caught the animal (a reflection of another Soviet theme, that of Man conquering Nature), Peter persuades some hunters, late on the scene, to help him escort the wolf to a zoo.

But what of the instruments of the orchestra? By assigning different instruments (and themes) to different protagonists in the tale, Prokofiev provides a means of allowing children to readily identify what they hear. Thus, Peter is associated with strings, the bird with the flute, the duck with the oboe, the cat with the clarinet, the grandfather with a bassoon, the wolf with three menacing horns, and the hunters with loud percussive outbursts. Once the particular connections are made, development of the musical material vividly depicts the twists and turns of the narrative so that, with only the occasional prompt from the narrator, the audience is able to hear what is going on, and to visualise it in their mind's eye.