

EL PASO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA
FEBRUARY 27 & 28, 2026
PROGRAM NOTES

Sergei Prokofiev

Born April 23, 1891 – Sontsivka, Ukraine

Died March 5, 1953 – Moscow, Russia

Symphony No. 7, C-sharp minor, Op. 131

Sergei Prokofiev seemed to have traveled in reverse. A staunch modernist by nature, Prokofiev both shocked and enraged his teachers and listeners alike with compositions that were poignant in harmonic and rhythmic complexity, a style that would land him in hot water after the formation of the Soviet state.

Prokofiev's first shift in style came with his travels to the United States from 1918 to 1922. It is here that Prokofiev's catalogue is marked with perhaps his most successful work, *Piano Concerto No. 3, Op. 26*, which sees regular performance today. *Piano Concerto No. 3* is a toned-down approach when compared to Prokofiev's earliest works, a charming blend of romantic music and modernist ideas.

Prokofiev's style takes a fascinating twist at the end of his life. The mid-1940s saw his two largest symphonies, numbers five and six, which are used today to showcase the high point of Prokofiev's creative abilities on a larger scale. His symphony output, however, was not finished. One more was to come, just one year before his untimely death.

Symphony No. 7, Op. 131 came in 1952. Being in his sixties, one would expect Prokofiev to produce yet another titanic piece that showcased his complete potential. However, the final product surprises listeners even to this day. *Symphony No. 7* is Prokofiev's salute to the lush romanticism of the late 19th century – a time he was born into but had never contributed to musically. At approximately half an hour long, it is shorter than the majority of Prokofiev's other symphonies, and with the exception of the uncharacteristically classical *Symphony No. 1* (1917), it is the most palatable. Memorable melodies paired with Prokofiev's talent for orchestration make the listener wonder what further evolutions, or "de-evolutions," the composer's music would have taken if he had only lived longer. *Symphony No. 7*'s ending is perhaps its most charming aspect. After a fast finale (the symphony's most eclectic movement), Prokofiev ends the piece softly with a melancholy coda and a subtle chord at the very end. A fascinating conclusion to the mighty composer's catalogue of symphonies.

An alternate ending to the symphony exists as well. Prokofiev wrote a second coda to be added on when he submitted the work for the Stalin Prize, an artistic contest with large prize purses. The extra coda allows the symphony to end "loudly" with a fast final cadence; a characteristic Prokofiev thought would increase his winning chances. It did not. Alas, both endings are performed and recorded today.

Sergei Prokofiev died at the age of 61 on March 5, 1953, the same day as Joseph Stalin.

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 17, 1770, Bonn, Germany

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria

Studying the compositional phases of Beethoven's career, while essential when trying to understand how the greatest artist influenced music over the next 100 years, can come with challenges. The composer's nine symphonies are often used as a timeline to hear his changes in complexity and scale, but this becomes more difficult the more you listen. The consensus is that Beethoven's illustrious "middle period" is marked by pieces such as *Symphony No. 3 in E-flat Major (Eroica)* and *Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp Minor (Moonlight)*. However, marking Beethoven's "late period" using his symphonies alone is much more difficult.

All agree that the towering example of Beethoven's end phase is the great *Symphony No. 9 in D Minor*. While not outlandish compared to the titanic symphonies found later in the century, an hour-long symphony with a choir at the end was astonishing in 1824. But when did this phase of unparalleled creativity begin?

Whatever your opinion might be, *Symphony No. 7 in A Major, Op. 92* is Beethoven at the height of his powers. Premiered in 1813, five years after the appearance of the fifth and sixth symphonies, the seventh is relatively straightforward, following the structure of the majority of the composer's symphonies. This is important given that Beethoven's most outlandish symphony up to that point had been his sixth, which contained five movements and a programmatic theme of the outdoors. Rather than continue down that path of creativity immediately, Beethoven returned to the traditional four-movement "absolute music" structure for the Seventh Symphony.

Beethoven was proud of the piece. It was composed starting in 1811, with Beethoven suffering nearly complete hearing loss. Throughout his adult life, Beethoven had pursued numerous medical ideas to possibly restore his hearing, and the construction of the seventh symphony took place while Beethoven was visiting the Czech town of Teplice, known for its mineral spas.

Beethoven conducted the premiere himself in 1813 in Vienna. The piece was well received, and the slow movement was performed twice, as requested by the audience. Today, *Symphony No. 7* is a stalwart repertoire for symphony orchestras and a highly collectable piece of music for recording aficionados.

Nathan Black is the general manager of the El Paso Symphony Youth Orchestras and a section cellist in the El Paso Symphony Orchestra. In addition, he produces and hosts 88.5 FM KTEP's *El Paso Symphony Orchestra Broadcast*, and as of 2022 is the resident lecturer of EPSO's "Opening Notes" series.