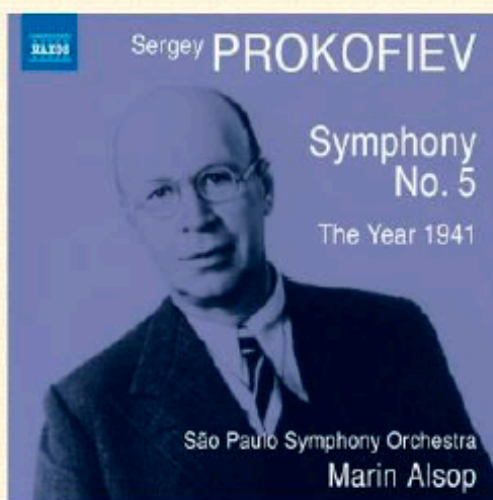
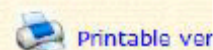


**REVIEW**  
**RECORDING OF THE MONTH****Sergei PROKOFIEV (1891-1953)**

*The Year 1941*, Op. 90 (Symphonic Suite) (1941) [15:01]  
Symphony No 5 in B flat major, Op. 100 (1944) [44:47]

- São Paulo Symphony Orchestra/Marin Alsop  
rec. 26-31 August, 2011. Sala São Paulo, Brazil DDD
- **NAXOS 8.573029** [59:48]

The São Paulo Symphony Orchestra - Orquestra Sinfônica do Estado de São Paulo (OSESP) - was founded in 1954. Previous Principal Conductors have included John Neschling (1997-2008), with whom the orchestra made a number of well-received recordings, and Yan Pascal Tortelier (2009-2011). In 2011 the orchestra achieved something of a coup by appointing the high-profile American, Marin Alsop as principal conductor from March 2012, a post she will combine with her similar role at the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra. The OSESP and Ms Alsop have chosen to inaugurate their relationship on CD with a cycle of Prokofiev symphonics, of which this is the first instalment. Collectors may also be interested to note that the orchestra's website indicates that they will be also recording for Naxos a complete cycle of the Villa-Lobos symphonies under the Brazilian conductor, Isaac Karabtchevsky (volume 1 8.573043 (6 and 7) just issued). This Prokofiev CD is released to coincide with a European tour, which included a successful British debut at the BBC Proms ([review](#)).

The Fifth, one of Prokofiev's most important compositions, is a good place to begin such a cycle but if the Fifth is well known its companion on this CD most certainly isn't. It's intelligent programming not only to couple a familiar and an unfamiliar piece but also to place together two wartime works written at very different points in the Russian experience of World War II. In 1941 the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union had just begun - and Prokofiev had been evacuated to the relative safety of the Caucasus - but by the time he came to compose his Fifth symphony the tide of war had turned in favour of the Allies.

*The Year 1941* was written between July and November of that year. It's in three movements, 'In the Struggle', 'In the Night' and 'For the Brotherhood of Man'. The work was not well received when it was first heard in 1943 and, apparently, it's never been published. Naxos don't claim this as a première recording but I doubt it's been recorded - or played - very often; I'd never heard it before. I wouldn't say it's top-drawer Prokofiev but it's worth hearing, especially the central section, much of which is in the composer's lyrical vein.

Unlike *The Year 1941* the Fifth Symphony was well received from the outset. One of its early champions was Serge Koussevitzky, who gave the US première of the piece in November 1945 and who made a very fine recording of it - perhaps the work's first recording - for Victor in February the following year. Koussevitzky gave Prokofiev direct support - the Fourth symphony was one of the works commissioned for the Boston Symphony's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1930 and he was later invited to conduct the orchestra. Prokofiev also benefited from the conductor's more general support for Soviet composers during the war about which Michael Steinberg has related a charming story. Koussevitzky arranged for several shipments of manuscript paper to be sent from the USA to the Soviet Union. When he received the score of the Fifth to prepare for the US première he discovered that it had been written out on some of that very paper!

In a note in the booklet for the Koussevitzky recording Prokofiev is quoted as saying the following about the Fifth. "I wished to glorify man as free and happy, his mighty strength, his noble spirit. I would not say that I searched for this theme. It was born in me and required expression." So, the symphony clearly was intended to express lofty ideals. I'd say that Marin Alsop's performance pretty much measures up to the expectations that such a statement arouses.

In the first movement she brings out the power and the lyricism in Prokofiev's writing. The playing she gets from the OSESP is very good; in particular the bass end of the orchestra is powerful, as it needs to be, without overpowering the textures. The extended climax near the end (11:07 - 12:47) is imposing; here, as elsewhere, the percussion section is well reported by the recording. The pithy, mobile scherzo is played with bite. The bridge passage to the trio is played more slowly than I can recall hearing - perhaps just a fraction *too* slowly - while the trio itself, which would not be out of place in *Romeo and Juliet*, is elegantly phrased. The malevolent, sneering return to the scherzo material is taken deliberately, as it should be, but once Alsop and her players get back to the scherzo it's taken at a real lick.

In his notes Keith Anderson says that the slow movement is "a movement of sustained lyricism, with a fiercely dramatic middle section". Yes, it is lyrical but I think there's also a darkness, even a feeling of tragedy, which harks back to the closing moments of *Romeo and Juliet*. In the central section (from 5:00 onwards) Alsop imparts the necessary gravitas as well as drama to the slow march, building it to a potent climax (7:20 - 7:50). After Prokofiev has returned to the material of the opening Alsop and her players deliver the gently luminous closing pages expertly. The generally high spirited finale, with its often brittle orchestration, is done with spirit and élan. There are plenty of good recordings of this important symphony in the catalogue but this newcomer ranks among the best I've heard.

The recordings were made in the orchestra's home, the Sala São Paulo. This 1500-seater hall is, I believe, a converted railway station. The engineers have produced a very good recording with plenty of presence and clarity. The booklet notes are adequate. Marin Alsop's Prokofiev cycle has been launched auspiciously and I look forward to future issues.

*John Quinn*

*see also review by Leslie Wright*

**Masterwork Index: Prokofiev symphonies**