

Reviewed: The Love and Wars of Lina Prokofiev by Simon Morrison

The lonely fate of the great composer's wife.

By Amanda Foreman
21 March 2013



The Russia the Prokofievs return to was a gilded cage. Photograph: Michael Kirchoff

The Love and Wars of Lina Prokofiev: the Story of Lina and Sergei Prokofiev

Simon Morrison

Harvill Secker, 336pp, £18.99

Not every one can be Alma Mahler, whose success in the marriage stakes was immortalised in Tom Lehrer's song "Alma": "Alma, tell us/All modern women are jealous/You should have

a statue in bronze/For bagging Gustav and Walter and Franz”. (As in Mahler, Gropius and Werfel.) Still, the fate that awaited Carolina (Lina) Codina after she married Sergei Prokofiev was particularly cruel. Enticed along with her husband to return to the Soviet Union in 1936, Lina spent eight years in the Gulag, abandoned by all but her dutiful sons.

Lina’s mother had warned her daughter against falling for a man like Prokofiev. She did not think he’d take proper care of her – and she was right. But Mrs Codina had not reckoned on Lina’s insatiable ambition to be “someone”, even if it is was only by association. Lina knew all too well what life offered for the mediocre and the might-have-beens.

Born in Spain in 1897 to a Russian mother and Spanish father, Lina watched her parents eke out a living giving voice lessons and the occasional concert in regional theatres. Eventually, the family ended up in New York, where they rented a small apartment in the respectable part of Washington Heights. Lina’s education finished at 16. But thanks to a pretty figure, a phenomenal talent for languages and a passable soprano voice, she was adopted by an exclusive cadre within the Russian émigré community.

Prokofiev thundered into Lina’s life in 1918 when he was 27 and she was 21. He had come to the US in the hope of making it as a composer and piano soloist. Unfortunately, after a promising start he neglected his performing in order to work on the opera *The Love for Three Oranges*. The piece had been commissioned by the Chicago Opera Association and support for its premiere did not survive the unexpected death of the director. Humiliated and broke, Prokofiev left the US in 1920 and went to live in Paris, with a smitten Lina in tow. Ostensibly, she had followed him to France to work on her singing but in practice she was Prokofiev’s bedfellow, secretarial assistant and nurse to his aged mother.

Putting up with Prokofiev’s legendary arrogance required a special mix of personal ambition and self-denial. Lina happened to possess it in abundance. She wanted to be a famous singer but had neither the discipline nor the talent to join the ranks of the truly great. Failing in a career of her own, she was more than willing to share in Prokofiev’s.

Lina tried everything to convince him to marry her but nothing worked until she fortuitously became pregnant with their first child in 1923. They were married in the Bavarian village of Ettal, where Prokofiev spent a year composing the opera *The Fiery Angel*, based on the novel of the same name by Valery Bryusov. That they were married in Germany rather than France, or anywhere else for that matter, would have remained a minor detail were it not for the fact that years later the Soviets annulled the marriage on the spurious pretext that it was never registered in a Russian consulate.

As Mrs Prokofiev, Lina could at last enjoy the limelight as a “someone”, though it was rarely, if ever, in her own right as “Lina Llubera” (her stage name). Even when she gave a concert with Prokofiev accompanying her, the audience came to watch him play rather than listen to her sing. Lina also had a continuous battle on her hands, according to Morrison:

. . . for Serge’s attention, a frustrating contest, given not only his wandering eye but also his self-obsession. She had succumbed to his magnetism and had the wiles to maintain his affection, so she braved the broad range of other women in his life without protest. His indifference to her needs was, and always would be, the greater affront to her pride.

It was pride on both their parts that led the Prokofievs into the trap laid on for them by the Soviets. The seduction began slowly, with an invitation to tour the country in 1927. Prokofiev’s cousin, Shurik, had recently been imprisoned as a counter-revolutionary but this failed to have a dampening effect on the Prokofievs’ enthusiasm for the country. Shielded from the paranoia and poverty unleashed by Stalin’s murderous regime, they bathed rapturously in the carefully choreographed adulation of the Russian intelligentsia. Lina, just as much as Serge, was lulled into believing that her musical gifts enjoyed a special place of honour in her ancestral homeland.

Ironically, the Soviet official in Paris who did most to facilitate these trips, an embassy counsellor named Jean-Joseph Arens, would end up being recalled and executed in 1937. By then it was far too late for the Prokofievs to escape. The early 1930s had not been good for the career of either. The death of the ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev in 1929 had deprived Prokofiev of his most fruitful collaborator. He also found that in the west his popularity and reputation were running a distant third behind that of two other Russian exports: Sergei Rachmaninoff and Igor Stravinsky. By contrast, there seemed to be a vast untapped store of ballets and operas awaiting Prokofiev in Moscow.

The extent to which Lina and Sergei were willing dupes in their deception can be judged from the farcical nature of his telephone calls to her when he was in Leningrad and she was in Paris in 1934. Interference began subtly enough with operators allowing them to speak when the connection was poor and cutting them off when the line improved. Soon the interference became more blatant and the Prokofievs began to hear laughter and commentary in the background. Finally, on 19 November 1934, Sergei faded out mid-sentence, leaving Lina to shout, “I can’t hear you”; at which point the eavesdropper announced, “You were perfectly audible, I just decided to cut you off.” Yet once the train had been set in motion for their relocation to Russia, neither felt able to call a halt. Not even the sudden official persecution of Shostakovich in 1936 was strong enough to shake the Prokofievs’ confidence that they, in contrast, would be untouchable in Moscow.

At first it appeared as though the Prokofievs were immune to the ravages of the Great Terror. It was only towards the end of 1938 that Lina and Sergei fully woke up to the reality that they had walked into a gilded cage – and thrown away the key. The Prokofievs made their final tour abroad that year. If the couple now regretted their move to Russia, they kept their feelings to themselves. By all accounts Lina put on a magnificent show in the US, wearing couture clothes every night as though she never wore anything else in Moscow. In Washington she finally won a measure of the recognition she craved by giving her own recital at a glittering soirée at the Russian embassy.

Prokofiev also met with complete adoration, especially from Hollywood. Both Paramount and Disney tried to persuade him to sign a contract. Walt Disney even sweetened the deal by offering Prokofiev \$1,500 for the rights to a cartoon version of *Peter and the Wolf*. But, in typical Soviet style, the Prokofievs' two boys had not been given permission to leave Russia, effectively turning the children into hostages in case their parents developed any ideas about not returning home at the end of their tour.

Lina's life began to unravel almost as soon as they returned to Moscow. Their marriage had staggered on in part because Sergei was almost always travelling. Once they were forced to live together without a break, he found companionship elsewhere with a young woman half his age called Mira Abramovna Mendelson. She was the daughter of two party apparatchiks and a student at the prestigious Maxim Gorky Literary Institute in Moscow. There was nothing especially interesting about the girl, as Lina discovered during her jealous investigations. But Mira did enjoy one advantage over her rival: she had no interest or desire other than to devote herself entirely to Prokofiev. Lina tried every possible trick to keep Sergei within the family fold but Mira turned out to be the more ruthless of the two. Whenever Prokofiev appeared to be wavering in favour of his wife, Mira would threaten to kill herself unless he immediately returned. The couple began cohabitating in 1941 when he was 47 and she was 23.

Lina was left in an appalling predicament. She was a 44-year-old mother with two adolescent sons and no obvious means of support in a city that was under intense aerial bombardment. Prokofiev and Mira had been evacuated, along with the city's other prominent artists, to Alma-Ata in Kazakhstan. He was not unsympathetic when Lina's pleas for money or food occasionally reached him but there was little he could do to ensure that anything he did send actually reached its destination. In a desperate bid to shield her children, Lina worked in every kind of capacity, including trench-digging around the city's perimeter. Moscow was a terrifying place during the war: lawless, rapacious, dangerous and cruel. Lina discovered a well of inner strength and reserve that she never knew existed within her. She resolutely kept trying to get her family out of the city and, if possible, out of the country, but every scheme fell through.

Prokofiev had been churning out patriotic music during the war, and in peacetime returned to Moscow an even greater Soviet hero than when he left. Understandably, Lina refused to grant him a divorce – at least not until she and the boys were safely in the west. The stalemate between them ended in 1948 in spectacular fashion: Prokofiev suddenly fell from favour and the majority of his work was banned.

As a non-person he was at the mercy of Soviet bureaucracy, which, for no discernible reason, decided that his marriage was invalid. This left Sergei free to marry Mira and deprived Lina of her last shred of protection. A few weeks after the wedding, NKVD agents arrested Lina on the charge of espionage. Her unceasing attempts to cultivate high-level contacts in western embassies – in the hope of getting an exit visa – had caused her name to get on the wrong list.

After enduring 13 months of torture and interrogation, Lina was given a 15-minute trial and sentenced to 20 years in a forced labour camp. It is at this point that a glaring omission in Simon Morrison's immensely readable and entertaining book comes to light. The reader is at page 254 with only 40 pages to go, while Lina has another 40 years to live. Her eight years in the Gulag takes up a little over 20 pages and then it's a romp home to old age. The vast lacuna that is Lina's life after the death of Prokofiev in 1953 (three years before her release) cruelly highlights the very fear that made her cling to the composer for all those years: she was "someone" with him, and no one without him.

It isn't only women spouses whose history is reduced to a few footnotes in the annals of their famous husband's lives. No one remembers Mr Edith Wharton or Mr Agatha Christie, either. Morrison, at least, has given this footnote its due and told the story of a woman who was a desperate little nobody when she was married, and became a courageous heroine when she was single. Someone should give Lina Prokofiev her own Wikipedia page.

Amanda Foreman is a historian. Her latest book is "A World on Fire: an Epic History of Two Nations Divided" (Penguin, £14.99)