

FINANCIAL  
TIMES

# Ivan the Terrible, Konzerthaus Berlin, Musikfest Berlin: 'Timeless'

**Frank Strobel** conducts a live orchestral accompaniment to Eisenstein's Stalin-era masterpiece

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The film epic *Ivan the Terrible*, directed by Eisenstein to music by Prokofiev, is an inherently operatic work, so setting its images to live orchestra may seem a logical step. At the weekend, conductor Frank Strobel, the Rundfunk-Sinfonieorchester Berlin and Rundfunkchor Berlin unveiled a new edition of the score that incorporates not just Prokofiev's printed manuscripts but changes and additions made during filming. To make a live orchestral performance possible, the European Filmphilharmonie, of which Strobel is co-founder, used digital technology to isolate spoken dialogue and ambient sounds on to a separate track.

Hearing Prokofiev's music played live draws attention to its subtleties, from the subversively ironic use of brass as Ivan's forces charge toward the city of Kazan, to the grumbling cellos that play his leitmotif against a close-up of his estranged profile. Commissioned by Stalin in 1942, Eisenstein's black-and-white masterpiece about the 16th-century Tsar who slaughtered the nobility and expanded Russia into a multi-ethnic empire is a thinly veiled commentary on Stalin himself. While the first part won a state prize, the more overtly satirical second instalment was banned for its "ignorance of historical facts" and portrayal of Ivan as a "personality reminiscent of Hamlet". The third part of the trilogy, inspired by Wagner's *Ring*, was never completed.



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Prokofiev, having just returned to his home country from exile and at the height of his powers, propels Eisenstein's images with sensitive wit, **introducing swirling dance music in the second part, which Strobel here timed expertly with the film.** Quasi-liturgical choruses emerged with pure, homogenous tone by the Rundfunkchor, and it was an inspired touch to have the singers stamp and whistle during the dances of the Oprichniki, Ivan's personal guard.

The inclusion of soloists (mezzo Marina Prudenskaja and bass Alexander Vinogradov) proved problematic, as the characters onscreen were reduced to lip-syncing. The "Song of the Beaver", in which Ivan's aunt Yevfrosina plots for her son to take the throne, alternated between muffled, recorded speech and Prudenskaja's earthy tone. When the orchestra was in full force, the new edition also drowned out portions of dialogue, which with its careful Russian inflections is poetry in its own right. The production nevertheless offers a precious opportunity to revisit this timeless work.

