

Sergei Prokofiev

Violin Concerto No. 1 in D, Opus 19

SERGEI PROKOFIEV was born in Sontsovka, Ukraine, on April 23, 1891, and died in Moscow on March 5, 1963. He composed his Violin Concerto No. 1 in 1916 and 1917. A performance was planned in the latter year, but political conditions in Russia necessitated a postponement. As a result, the first performance took place in Paris, on October 18, 1923, when Serge Koussevitzky introduced the work, with soloist Marcel Darrieux, in one of his own concerts there, subsequently giving the American premiere with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on April 24 and 25, 1925, with Richard Burgin, the orchestra's concertmaster, as soloist.

IN ADDITION TO THE SOLO VIOLIN, Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 1 is scored for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, tuba, timpani, snare drum, tambourine, harp, and strings.

The D major concerto was composed during one of the richest years of Prokofiev's early maturity. His early reputation as an *enfant terrible*—earned for the first two piano concertos, the *Scythian Suite*, the *Sarcasms* for piano solo, and the opera *The Gambler* (written, as he put it, in “an ultra-left idiom”)—began to be modified with a series of works showing a “softening of temper” (again the words are Prokofiev's own), works that poured out so quickly that he almost outran his own opus numbers: the Opus 27 songs, completed in five or six days, were in fact finished before Opus 19 (the present violin concerto), Opus 25 (the *Classical Symphony*), or Opus 26 (the Third Piano Concerto), all of which had been started, even extensively sketched, but not yet orchestrated, since he was so engrossed in the completion and hoped-for staging of the opera.

The violin concerto started life as a theme for what was originally to be a one-movement “concertino” for violin and orchestra conceived early in 1915. During the ensuing two years, the one movement grew to three and the little concertino became a full-fledged concerto that takes flight from the meditative song that introduces its first movement. He completed the scoring of the concerto during the summer of 1917, a summer spent in the country, where, between bouts of orchestrating, he was composing in his head the *Classical Symphony*. When the planned performance in St. Petersburg that fall failed to take place owing to the political upheavals of the time, Prokofiev decided to leave Russia for America.

It was nearly six years before the score finally came to performance. During that time Prokofiev found himself disillusioned with American response to his music. He wrote his opera *Love for Three Oranges* for Chicago, and other works were performed there, but on the whole he found “less understanding than support” there, while in New York “there was no understanding but neither was there any support.” So he settled first in Germany and then in Paris, where, in October 1923, Serge Koussevitzky gave the first performance of the violin concerto. Several violinists were approached as possible soloists; Bronislaw Huberman flatly refused to learn “that music,” as did several other violinists. Finally Koussevitzky gave the solo to his concertmaster, who, in the composer's view, “did quite well with it.” Despite the delay before its first performance, the concerto quickly entered the repertory, especially after it was taken up enthusiastically by Joseph Szigeti, who played it the following year at a festival of modern music in Prague. Szigeti's love for the work no doubt had a great deal to do with its steadily spreading fame. But before long the concerto was so firmly established that it no longer required the services of one or two devoted exponents of new music; it had simply become part of the repertory.

Critics of Prokofiev have tended to fall into one of two schools, depending on political orientation. Soviet writers denigrate Prokofiev's early work, when he was overtly a modernist, in comparison with the more generally accessible scores that he composed after his definitive return to Russia in the '30s; they claim that the later works show the beneficial effects of “socialist realism” on his style. Western critics, on the other hand, have tended to hail the earlier works as more significant and imaginative, while deploring what they regard as the oversimplified prettiness of his later scores. As is often the case, these views tend to straitjacket discussion of Prokofiev's music to no good purpose. His work reveals a love of the lyrical and of the grotesque at all periods, though one or the other may predominate in any given score.

The three movements of the First Violin Concerto project an unusual outline in that the outer movements are generally more lyrical in character, while the middle movement is an energetic scherzo. But since the entire work grew from the “meditative” theme that opens the whole, it is not surprising to find that quality dominating—or rather, it is surprising only in comparison with such contemporaneous scores as that of *The Gambler*. Prokofiev features the soloist almost throughout as the leader of various small instrumental ensembles of varying color, always

foremost in our attention; he calls for a wide range of expressive effects from the simplest *cantabile* line to pizzicato chords, a *ponticello* passage (bowing near the bridge of the instrument) in the second movement, sudden shifts from bowed to plucked notes, and floating, high harmonics. But however extreme in its technical difficulties the solo part may have seemed eighty years ago, it has now become part of the mainstream of the violinistic tradition. That means that listeners concern themselves not with the sheer feat of the performance accomplished, but rather with the singular colorful beauties of Prokofiev's score.

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