

**Sergei PROKOFIEV, (1891–1953)**  
**Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major, Op. 19 (1915–17)**

**By Horst Scholz**

In 1914, the 23-year-old Sergei Prokofiev completed his studies at the St Petersburg Conservatory, where his teachers had included Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and Anatoly Liadov. The following year he noted down a lyrical violin melody that he planned to work up into a single-movement Concertino, and which he always regarded as one of his very best ideas (he often jotted it down when signing his autograph). But other tasks – such as work on his opera *The Gambler* – distracted him; and when he took up the sketches again in 1917, the year of his *Classical Symphony* and *Visions fugitives*, the original plan soon expanded to become a three-movement concerto: the *Violin Concerto No. 1 in D major*, Op. 19. When preparing the solo part, he was advised by the important Polish violinist Paul Kochanski (1887–1934), a duo partner of Artur Schnabel's and then a professor at the St Petersburg Conservatory, who was also the soloist envisaged for the planned première in November 1917. Hopes for such a performance were dashed by the turmoil of the Revolution, however, and the first performance did not take place until 18th October 1923 – in Paris, roughly at the time Prokofiev himself arrived there from Ettal in Germany. In the meantime, Kochanski had moved to the USA and so the soloist on that occasion, with the Paris Opera Orchestra, was Marcel Darrieux; it was conducted by Serge Koussevitzky.

The reason why the leader of the orchestra that performed at the première – rather than a famous virtuoso – played the solo part (according to Prokofiev, he 'did quite well with it'), was that grandees such as '[Bronisław] Huberman and some other violinists flatly refused to learn "that music".' This state of affairs would soon change, as the composer observed with satisfaction. 'In the summer of 1924 [Joseph] Szigeti played my Violin Concerto at a contemporary music festival in Prague, and then took the piece on tour to all the European capitals.' Prokofiev continued, in his autobiography: 'When he came to Paris and I expressed the desire to attend the rehearsal, his face fell. "You see," he said, "I love that concerto and I know the score so well that I sometimes give pointers to the conductor as if it were my own composition. But you must admit that under the circumstances the presence of the author would be embarrassing for me."' I agreed and went to the concert instead. Szigeti played superbly.'

Three days after the Paris première, about which the reviewers were somewhat ambivalent ('Some of them', remarked Prokofiev, 'commented not without malice on its "Mendelssohnisms"'), Nathan Milstein and Vladimir Horowitz gave the first Russian performance of the concerto in Moscow, in a version for violin and piano. 'All of Moscow's musical élite came to the concert', Milstein reported, and the composer Nikolai Myaskovsky wrote to Prokofiev in Paris to tell him that his popularity had now 'become almost obnoxious. You have even put Moscow's idols Rachmaninov and Medtner into the shade!' Nathan Milstein summed it up: 'Prokofiev's *First* is indeed one of the best modern violin concertos. It is a brilliant piece, perhaps the finest of all Prokofiev's works.'

The above-mentioned violin theme – which opens the concerto – is heard *sognando* (dreamily) above gently shimmering violas, and engages in a gentle dialogue with the

woodwind. A second, wide-ranging conversational theme (*narrante*) appears, leading the way to firmer ground. The development, which begins *pizzicato* in the solo violin, pursues the harmonic potential of the opening theme. The abbreviated recapitulation also focuses on the main theme – which now, however, is transferred to the orchestra, intoned by the principal flute while the muted solo violin and the harp dart nimbly around it. The scherzo (*Vivacissimo*), in rondo form, is a burlesque *danse macabre* with very lively figuration and gruff double-stopping. The precise, motoric accompaniment figures and striking bassoon theme that open the finale (*Moderato*) are soon transformed into an expressive song by the soloist, who then drops back to become more of an accompanist (*Allegro moderato*); both of these roles are then combined in increasingly impassioned utterances. Meanwhile the bassoon motif, having plunged down to the low strings, rises up grandiosely and becomes entwined with the solo violin, until the latter finally refers back to the *sognando* beginning of the concerto, with long chains of trills, and floats magically away.

David Oistrakh, speaking of his first encounter with the concerto, remarked: ‘I was attracted by the cantabile themes, the marvelous harmonies in the accompaniment, the innovative technique; above all by the confidently radiant major-key coloring of the entire work, like a landscape bathed in sunlight.’ And also non-violinists such as pianist Sviatoslav Richter were enthusiastic: ‘For me, the work that one simply had to love (and thus also its composer) was the *First Violin Concerto*. Later I met many people whose love of Prokofiev’s music also started with this work. It seems to me impossible that anybody who loves music could fail to be smitten by the piece. The impression it makes is like when you open a window for the first time in springtime, and lively sounds find their way inside’.