

Prokofiev: Concerto No. 1 in D Major for Violin and Orchestra, Opus 19

Program Notes, San Francisco Symphony, by Michael Steinberg

Sergei Sergeyevich Prokofiev was born in Sontsovka (now Krasnoye), Government of Ekaterinoslav (Dniepropetrovsk) in Ukraine on April 23, 1891, and died in Nikolina Gora near Moscow on March 5, 1953, not quite an hour before Stalin. He began a Concertino for Violin in 1915 but soon abandoned the project to concentrate on his Dostoyevsky opera *The Gambler*, returning to what became his Violin Concerto No. 1 in the summer of 1917. The first performance was given on October 18, 1923, at one of the Concerts Koussevitzky in Paris, with Marcel Darrieux as soloist. Koussevitzky brought the concerto to North America in his first season as conductor of the Boston Symphony. That was on April 24, 1925. The soloist was Richard Burgin, a lifelong champion of new music. The San Francisco Symphony first played the work in March 1939 under Pierre Monteux's direction with concertmaster Naoum Blinder as soloist. In the most recent SFS subscription concerts, in June 2008, Alexander Barantschik was soloist and James Gaffigan conducted. The orchestra consists of two flutes (second doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, tuba, timpani, tambourine, military drum, harp, and strings. Duration: about twenty minutes.

The year 1917 could not have been an easy one for a Russian composer to concentrate on his work. A series of strikes, anti-war marches, and the refusal of soldiers to fire on the demonstrators led, step by step, to revolution and the abdication of the Tsar; Lenin arrived at Petrograd's Finland Station after ten years of exile; the Black Sea fleet mutinied; there were terrible food shortages in the big cities; the Kerensky government was overthrown in the October Revolution (which actually took place on November 7 according to the Western European calendar) and Lenin became Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars; and an armistice with Germany was signed at Brest-Litovsk. Nonetheless, for Prokofiev 1917 was the most richly productive year of his life, the one in which he composed not only the *Classical Symphony*, but the Violin Concerto No. 1, the Third and Fourth piano sonatas, and the *Visions fugitives* for piano, and in which he began the ambitious and in many ways remarkable cantata on Chaldean texts, *Seven, They Are Seven* as well as his *Piano Concerto No. 3*. By the time he left the Saint Petersburg Conservatory, Prokofiev had consolidated his friendship with Boston Symphony conductor Serge Koussevitzky, who had already led the premiere of the Prokofiev's *Piano Concerto No. 1* and who was to become not only Prokofiev's most devoted and effective, but also his first publisher.

Prospects in Russia did not, however, look promising to Prokofiev, and in March 1918, having persuaded Koussevitzky to give him a substantial advance, raising some more money through concerts (he conducted the premiere of the *Classical Symphony* at one of these), and having talked an official into issuing a passport with no expiration date, Prokofiev took off for America. He did it by heading East, via Trans-Siberian Railway to Vladivostok, then by ship to Tokyo, where he gave some concerts, and finally across the Pacific. Thus, the first of his seven visits to the United States began in San Francisco, and his first view of this continent was of the still unbridged Golden Gate.

The immigration authorities, taking him for a Bolshevik spy, did not treat him kindly. With few dollars but carrying a hefty package of scores including the still unheard *Violin Concerto*, he got on a train to New York as soon as he could. There he gave a piano recital that gave him a reputation as a sort of musical *fauve*, a wild man, and he recorded several piano rolls. At a concert in Petrograd, Prokofiev had once met Cyrus McCormick, President of the International Harvester Company (his father had invented the first mechanical reaper). Prokofiev liked machines, and McCormick, who liked modern music, had given the young composer his card and with expansive American bonhomie had said, “Look me up if you’re ever in Chicago.” On that basis, Prokofiev took off for the Midwest, where his luck began to improve. Frederick Stock programmed the *Scythian Suite* with the Chicago Symphony and the opera undertook to produce *The Love for Three Oranges*.

Prokofiev continued to compose, conduct, and play the piano, the latter two activities with mixed reactions from critics and audiences. He fell in love with, lived with, and eventually married Carlina Codina, a soprano with a Spanish father and an Alsatian-Polish mother and who sang under the name of Lina Llubera. He crossed the Atlantic several times, tried living in Bavaria, and at last, in the early fall of 1923, settled in Paris. There we find him once again taking up the connection with Koussevitzky, and poised for the belated premiere of the *Violin Concerto No. 1*.

It was not a great success. First of all, it had been difficult to find a soloist. Back in 1917 the plan had been for that superb Polish violinist, Paweł Kochański, then teaching in Petrograd, to give the premiere, but by 1923 he and Prokofiev had lost touch. Nathan Milstein was still in Russia. Bronisław Huberman refused even to look at the score. Marcel Darrieux, Koussevitzky's Paris concertmaster, was a solid musician and an able violinist, but he lacked the spark to make a convincing case for the piece. Its real career began the following year, when Joseph Szigeti played it in Prague. That incomparable Hungarian artist subsequently carried it all over Europe and America, was the first violinist to play it with orchestra in the Soviet Union, and was politely persistent with English *Columbia Records* executives until they allowed him to make the first recording of it with Sir Thomas Beecham in 1935.

The work was not likely to please musical *tout Paris* in 1923. Audiences there, and particularly those for the Concerts Koussevitzky, wanted their modern music to carry a certain shock value. Though Paris welcomed the Prokofiev of the spiky ballet score *The Buffoon* and the savage *Scythian Suite*, the *Violin Concerto* was simply too Romantic. The composer Georges Auric brought out the most wounding adjective in his vocabulary, Mendelssohnian. Ironically and not altogether surprisingly, Prokofiev had the opposite experience when he returned to Russia for the first time. There, people loved the *Violin Concerto*, but *The Buffoon* and the *Scythian Suite* did not please.

Prokofiev himself recognized in his life work four “basic lines,” which he called classical, modern, motoric, and lyrical. These do not, however, correspond to particular periods in his life. All are present all the time, in different balances of course, and the *Violin Concerto No. 1* exemplifies this. Prokofiev remarks that his “lyric line”—and he cites the opening of the *First Violin Concerto* as an instance—was “not noticed until late. For a long time I was given no credit for any lyric gift whatever, and for want of encouragement it developed slowly. But as time went on I gave more and more attention to this aspect of my work.” What the violin plays in the first

moments of this concerto is ravishing lyric invention indeed, rhythmically afloat, unpredictable in its unfolding. *Sognando*—“dreaming”—is the direction in the violin part. The melody is also beautifully accompanied by a soft aureole of string sound.

A second theme over a stubborn cello figure is different in every respect. Now the instruction to the violinist is *narrante*. The world famous Russian violinist David Oistrakh recounted that Prokofiev had said of this section, “Play it as though you’re trying to convince someone of something.” (Oistrakh had first played the concerto to Prokofiev as a boy in Odessa and was publicly shamed by being told he was doing it all wrong, but he became one of its splendid exponents, immensely admired by the composer.) The music gathers momentum and the solo part becomes ever more virtuosic. A brief passage for the violin alone opens the way for shimmering tremolandos like those with which the movement began, and what one might call this textural recapitulation introduces at last the return of the wonderful first melody, a little slower this time, played by the flute, with harp and solo violin adding delectable filigree. The last word is the flute’s, a quiet run of sixty-fourth-notes curling upward like a twist of scented smoke.

Szigeti writes in his memoirs that at first sight this concerto fascinated him “by its mixture of fairy-tale naïveté and daring savagery in lay-out and texture.” We have experienced that juxtaposition in the first movement. Now it is extended in that the second movement, a scherzo marked *vivacissimo*, represents the “savage” element as against the generally more lyrical first and third movements. The music, full of contrast, is by turns amusing, naughty, for a while even malevolent, athletic, and always violinistically ingenious and brilliant. It seems to be over in a moment.

Against a tick-tock of clarinet and strings, the bassoon proposes the first melody of the finale and does it rather in the manner of “as I was saying. . . .” The violin extends, comments, varies. In the second theme, too, the solo violin is often commentator more than protagonist. Most of the music is generously lyrical, and the orchestral textures become ever more elaborate. As the pace becomes more tranquil, the melody that opened the first movement returns. Now it belongs both to the soloist and to the orchestra’s first violins, the soloist playing it an octave higher and as a chain of trills. The glowing orchestral texture is studded with fragments of material from the third movement. The close is dreamy and at peace. Here too the flute is the last character to slip from the stage.

—Michael Steinberg

Michael Steinberg, the San Francisco Symphony’s program annotator from 1979 to 1999 and a contributing writer to our program book until his death in 2009, was one of the nation’s pre-eminent writers on music. We are privileged to continue publishing his program notes. His books are available at the Symphony Store in Davies Symphony Hall.