

Piano Concerto No. 3 in C major, Op. 26

Sergei Prokofiev

The artistic hotbed of Paris served as Sergei Prokofiev's base for a decade beginning in 1923. He had not yet become a full-time Parisian when he wrote his Piano Concerto No. 3, but he was already spending a good deal of time in France discovering his affinity for things Gallic. Most of the spring and summer of 1921 he spent in a village on the coast of Brittany, socializing with a few other Russians who found themselves there (some of whom shared his passion for chess), nurturing the budding romance that was growing between him and the woman he would marry, and composing. Among his neighbors was Konstantin Balmont, a Russian émigré poet. One day the composer played for Balmont music from the new piano concerto he was composing, and Balmont responded by jotting verses inspired by what he heard:

Prokofiev! Music and youth in bloom,
In you, the orchestra yearns for forgotten
summer sounds,
And the invincible Scythian beats on the
tambourine of the sun.

And so on. Not great poetry, but for his efforts Balmont was rewarded with the dedication of what is the most popular of Prokofiev's five piano concertos and, indeed, one of the most beloved concertos of the entire 20th century.

Prokofiev was a pragmatic composer. Rather than let work go to waste he frequently recycled music he had intended for an uncertain project into one that held more promise. Such was the case with the Third Piano Concerto. Although he composed it mostly in 1921, he drew on scraps of music penned earlier for pieces that never reached fruition. As early as 1911 he was busy working on three piano concertos simultaneously; one of them, which he reported would be "full of virtuoso passages," ended up stillborn, but ideas Prokofiev had drafted for it would make their way into the Third Piano Concerto a de-

cade later. The E-minor theme on which the second-movement variations are built dates back to 1913; two themes from the concerto's finale were penned in 1918, when they were intended for a string quartet. It would have been a curious quartet. Prokofiev called it a *quatuor blanc*, a "white quartet," because it was to include only notes corresponding to the white keys of the piano. The composer later recalled:

Then I began to think that such a quartet would sound monotonous, so I decided to split up the material. I used the first and second themes of the finale for the finale of the concerto So when I began working on the

IN SHORT

Born: April 23, 1891 (so he always claimed, though his birth certificate said April 27), in Sontsovka, in the Ekaterinoslav district of Ukraine

Died: March 5, 1953, in Moscow, USSR

Work composed: 1917–21, drawing on earlier material; completed in October 1921 in Etrétât, Brittany, France; dedicated to the poet Konstantin Balmont, a Russian émigré neighbor of Prokofiev's in Brittany

World premiere: December 16, 1921, by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, Frederick Stock, conductor, with the composer as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 26, 1922, with Albert Coates conducting the New York Symphony (which would merge with the New York Philharmonic in 1928), and the composer as soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: March 18, 2018, in Taipei, Taiwan, Jaap van Zweden, conductor, Yuja Wang, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 29 minutes

concerto in Brittany, I already had all the thematic material I needed except for the third theme of the finale and the subordinate theme of the first movement.

The three movements reflect a standard layout for a concerto but not for a Prokofiev concerto, as all his others conform to less usual patterns. Famously difficult in terms of its required dexterity and stamina, the work stands near the top of the list of ultra-virtuosic showpieces. And yet, it is not just a “show-off” concerto; it is a work of passionate expression and it can fly from the keyboard with what sound like bursts of spontaneity.

The premiere took place in Chicago, where Prokofiev was overseeing rehearsals for the premiere of his opera *The Love for Three Oranges*. The concerts there, on December 16–17, 1921, were received with considerable enthusiasm.

Not so the followup performances he played in New York on January 26–27, 1922, with Albert Coates conducting the New York Symphony. Prokofiev lamented that his American audiences “did not quite understand the work,” which apparently was the case since it proved a huge hit when it was introduced in Paris in April 1922 and in London shortly thereafter, in both cases conducted by Coates and with the composer as soloist. From then on, Prokofiev’s C-major Piano Concerto has never stopped its headlong rush to the C — that is, the one the soloist spreads over four octaves in the last measure.

Instrumentation: two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, timpani, bass drum, castanets, tambourine, cymbals, and strings, in addition to the solo piano.

Sources and Inspirations

The advent of rail travel in the late 1800s elevated the Brittany region of northwest France as a popular seaside retreat. Visitors were attracted by the combination of sandy beaches and rocky cliffs, and by the strong Celtic influences of the region, which in the Breton language and traditions had more in common with the British Isles than with the rest of France.

The relatively quick jaunt from Paris by train — a more convenient trip than going to the South of France — made Brittany a popular destination for artists as well. By the 1920s, when Sergei Prokofiev composed his Piano Concerto No. 3 there, a roster of boldface names had found inspiration in Brittany’s seascapes, rugged countryside, numerous chateaux, Druid monuments, and fortified medieval towns. Picasso worked in Brittany, and Marc Chagall and Henri Matisse also found their way there, following the example of Paul Gauguin. Debussy was said to have been inspired by the coastline to compose *La Mer*. The combination of composers and visual artists built on the area’s established literary tradition, which stretched back to Victor Hugo and Balzac, who also resided and worked in Brittany.



Residents of Brittany in the 1920s

— The Editors